

Vengeance And A Half

by Fire

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T./Serena/Bunny/Sailor Moon

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Summary: When Sailor Moon and her allies returned from Crystal Tokyo after stopping the Dark Moon Family there, they followed Prince Diamond back to the wrong time, just a single week before they left. Now the past has been altered, and no-one believes it is for
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1. General Advisory

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> | Vengeance And A Half |
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>
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>Part 0: General Advisory
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>
The characters and settings in this story are based on those by Takahashi Rumiko and Takeuchi Naoko. Takahashi-san created the world of Ranma 1/2, and Takeuchi-san created the world of Sailor Moon. These characters and events are used without permission, and apology is made for any offence that is given.

>

>Warning, this fic contains animated violence and some coarse language. There are no sex scenes, but there is nudity, kissing and the occasional reference to televised sports. While most of my fics would be suited to a 7:30 screening time for the children, this one

would probably be an 8:30 timeslot, with a PG13+ rating.

>
A word about the crossover of Ranma and Sailor Moon.
>
The two worlds of these anime and manga vary on the strength of their characters. Since there needs to be a fair amount of interaction, I am just going to lay some basic groundwork for the crossover.
>
Firstly, I have strengthened the characters from Sailor Moon. By and large, the Senshi and their adversaries do not do much in the way of collateral damage. That is, they rarely smash walls or destroy the scenery. Since both the good guys and the bad guys in Sailor Moon are boosted by magic, it is difficult to say just how they would react to damage caused by someone that is purely mundane.
>
For this crossover, I am saying that your average demon is very strong, and capable of dishing out great quantities of damage, matched only by the power of the Senshi. In combat against a normal human, a youma would win hands down every time. It has to be like this, otherwise the Ranma crew would wipe the floor with everyone.

>
For more details on just how things mesh together, read the story. Just don't expect the Ranma characters to act too powerfully. Especially since the Senshi have learned the benefit of acting as a team, when most martial artists fight alone.
>
This second set of details might act as a spoiler, so don't read it. Just to set things straight for the Ranma timeline, the Shi Shi Hokodan is introduced in volume 20. Nodoka is introduced in chapter 22, and the Saotome secret techniques are introduced in chapter 28.

>

>End of general advisory <p><p>

2. In Cold Blood

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> | Vengeance And A Half |
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>
What has happened:
>Nothing, this is the first chapter, silly.

>
Part 1: In Cold Blood
>=====

>Ryoga gave a feral grin. The malicious hatred in his smile was emphasised all the more by the presence of a pair of large fangs that showed through whenever he smiled or shouted. Normally, Ryoga had very little to smile about, so he just shouted in anger at his eternal rival. Today he did have something to smile about, so he threw his head back and yelled in ecstasy.

>"With this, I shall finally have the revenge that I so deserve! Saotome Ranma, the next day that we meet shall be your last among the living!"

>Laughing madly, Ryoga walked down the hill he was on, blindly

knocking over small trees and rocks. Branches scratched him and divots continually tried to trip him, but what did he need to worry about minor pains like that? Clenched tightly within one palm, Ryoga held the key to his every dream: the defeat of Saotome Ranma.

>There was no doubt that Ranma was the single person in existence that caused all of Ryoga's hardship. Ryoga could not think of a single reason why someone would dedicate their life to making him miserable, but Ranma obviously had some reason. No-one could cause as much pain to Ryoga unless they were doing it deliberately, which obviously meant that all of Ranma's life had been dedicated to causing Ryoga's suffering.

>Well, that suffering would end soon. Ryoga held in his hand a scroll that described the ultimate fighting technique. A technique so powerful that it was kept as a secret from almost everyone who would seek it. Only Ryoga had been worthy of the knowledge, and now he would use it to defeat Ranma. According to the young man that he had met only a couple of hours ago, Ryoga was slightly north of Tokyo. His victim was only a day's walk away, two days to be safe. Two days would also give Ryoga time to keep practising the Shi Shi Hokodan.

>It was funny how fate works some times. Just yesterday, Ryoga had been slightly misplaced. Not that he was lost, Ryoga was too good a martial artist to possibly get lost, he was just a little uncertain where he was. Things were normally bad enough when he was... misplaced... in a forest or a desert, but underground was even worse.

>Without being sure just how the pigtailed martial artist had done it, Ryoga was sure that it must have been Ranma's fault that he had been lost in a seemingly endless series of mines. With his limited store of patience already exhausted, Ryoga was almost ready to resort to desperate measures. He had been lost underground before, but now since Cologne had taught him the breaking point, it had never really been much of a problem.

>Ryoga went through his maps to see if any of them showed the layouts for the disused mine that he was in. He had still been reading over them when a bent old man had happened upon him in the cave. For some strange reason, the man had believed that Ryoga had been lost, despite the fact that the lost boy was sure that it was really just some hideous trick that Ranma had played on him.

>"Errr. It's a nasty set of caves we've got down here."

>"Eh? Oh, I didn't see you there. I don't suppose you know which way the subway is, do you?"

>The old miner laughed a little. "No, Boy. No subways down here. They save them for the city."

>Ryoga held up a random map. "But... I thought this was Kyoto..."

>"Kyoto? How'd you get that idea?"

>"Well, that's where I fell into the hole. I just kept walking for a while and ended up here."

>The old man looked concerned and stepped closer to Ryoga. "You sure you didn't bump your head when you fell in? We aren't anywhere near Kyoto."

>Ryoga gave a nervous chuckle and scratched the back of his head. "I guess I must have been mistaken. It's these maps you see. They're all the same."

>"Mmmm." The old man nodded wisely. "Well, Boy, just follow me and we'll be out of here in no time."

>The old miner - as he revealed himself to be - had not been lying. Only another ten minutes walk saw them back on the surface. Ryoga

looked around squinting in the bright light of the day and bowed deeply to the miner. "Thank you so much for getting me out of there. I need to get back to Tokyo as soon as possible."

>"Oh? What's in Tokyo? Your girlfriend?"

>So much blood rushed to Ryoga's face as he blushed, there was none left to operate his brain at normal capacity. Alternatively it was just the thought of Akane as his girlfriend that left him bereft of cognisant speech. "Well... No... But... That is... I haven't... And she... I... Arrrg! It all Ranma's fault!"

>"Whoa, Boy, whoa! Calm down there. You'll burst a blood vessel or something. This Ranma boy trying to steal your girl?"

>Snarling in almost-repressed frustration, Ryoga punched out at a tree, causing the great trunk to shake and begin to keel over. "Saotome Ranma. The most evil man in existence. It is because of him that I am out here training. Only when I am good enough can I return and free Akane from his clutches."

>"Training?"

>"I'm a martial artist, and the only way that I can defeat Ranma is to find a new technique that he will not be able to defeat. That's why I went training. If I can find the right attack..."

>The man lead Ryoga back to a shack that amazingly looked like it may have been both older and in worse shape than the miner. The floor was littered with old picks, shovels and rock samples, while the walls were covered in pictures of men who had been rendered unrecognisable by the masses of dirt and dust clinging to their faces. After rooting around in a chest for a while, the old miner came up with a scroll of paper that he presented to Ryoga.

>"This here's an ancient way of clearing your way out of mine fall-ins. Can't rightly say that I ever got it to work myself, but being a martial artist and all, maybe you can. Sure hopes this helps you with you're lady friend and all."

>Walking into a small, nameless town, Ryoga grinned to himself, but he managed to keep the laughter down to a low chuckle. Mothers still drew their children away from him, and men stepped out of his way, but no-one was actively running away, and that was good enough. It was three days ago that the miner had given him the scroll. For some amazing reason, the attack seemed to come so easily to him that Ryoga knew he would be able to defeat Ranma this time.

>All he needed to do was concentrate on his feelings, just like the instructions said. After a cave in, when you are trapped and the air is running out, you feel frightened and depressed. Concentrate on those feelings then learn how to free them. For a man plagued by the thrice-accursed Saotome Ranma, concentrating on feelings of depression came easily.

>Ryoga had been completely delighted when he had first released his attack, it was not as strong as the scroll described, but it would certainly do against someone as weak as Ranma. With the force of a bullet, Ryoga had been able to channel his depression into a weapon. He named the attack the Shi Shi Hokodan or Roaring Lion Bullet, and now he was going to destroy Ranma with it.

>A brief stop in the post office was all Ryoga needed before he set out for Tokyo. Two days walk, at most. Just two days until he could have Ranma within his grasp. This time, he would emerge victorious. He would be the one to finally he able to walk up to Akane and take her in his arms. He would be able to hold her, and finally admit his love. Then, slowly, as she looked up at him with adoration in her eyes, Ryoga would lower his face to her perfect lips and...

>A sharp blow to the head from behind brought Ryoga's attention back to the present. Grinning sheepishly, he apologised to the postmaster for just crushing one of his post boxes. That silly box should not

have been where he was walking anyway.

>Giving the postmaster the letter that he had written this morning, Ryoga grinned yet again. His challenge for Ranma was sent now. In two days time, he would meet Ranma, and then Ranma would meet his maker. There was nothing Ranma could do to possibly resist his new attack. Ryoga would crush him like an insect.

>A quick check of his map showed that Ryoga needed to head south to Tokyo. Squinting against the glare of the setting sun, Ryoga boosted his energy with the lovely thought of Ranma's corpse falling limply from his hands as he laughed and laughed and laughed.

>The villagers gave wide berth to the insanely laughing man. Something about him suggested great danger.

>* * *

>"What was so important that we had to skip lunch to come here?"

>The person queried made no attempt to answer verbally.

>"Oh, I see. Let me check that again... Mmmmm."

>With her back against a stack of gymnastic mats, Michiru held tightly to her friend and playfully fought with her tongue as she ran her hands through the short blonde hair in her grasp. Opening her eyes briefly, Michiru found herself staring straight back into a set of green eyes that were inflamed with passion. Less than an inch from her own, Michiru was almost startled by the intensity that they held.

>Breaking for breath, Michiru pulled the blonde next to her and gently nibbled on an ear as she spoke softly. "You looked so serious. Is there something the matter?"

>Haruka looked down at her smaller friend and smiled. Michiru might have been shorter than Haruka, but she was by no means small herself. Perhaps that was one of the reasons that Haruka was so often mistaken for a boy. With a short, boyish haircut and her naturally tall, lean frame, Haruka could easily pass herself off as an effeminate looking boy, especially at a distance. The fact that she normally chose to wear a boy's school uniform or men's clothes only aided the image.

>It was by no means a deliberate attempt to deceive people. Many saw through it immediately, and just assumed that Haruka's appearance was a fashion statement. Others leapt to the assumption that she wished she was a boy, or perhaps she thought she was one. This led them to believe that Haruka preferred to dress and act like one. That was not quite the truth, as Haruka was quite sure she was a woman, and entirely glad of the fact, she just felt more comfortable dressed that way.

>Then there were people like Michiru... But that was hardly true, there was no-one like Michiru. Michiru was special in every way, and defined her existence in some inexplicable manner that made her unlike everyone else, while allowing her to blend in at the same time. Haruka slid her long fingers through the light green locks of hair that cascaded down Michiru's shoulder and lowered her mouth for another kiss.

>"Nothing is the matter so long as you are with me."

>Playfully, Michiru accepted the bait that was dangling so obviously. "And if I'm not with you?"

>"Well, then, I guess I'll just have to find someone else... Kotomi in 3-C is pretty cute. And you know I'm a sucker for girls with green hair."

>"Oh, really? I'll have to find that out for myself." Interlacing her hands behind Haruka's back, Michiru held her close. "But I thought you preferred blondes..."

>"Humph. The day I prefer blondes is the day you dye your hair. It's the eyes, I think. You just have the most beautiful eyes."

>"And you say the sappiest things some times. I thought I was supposed to be the artist, poetic one."

>Haruka grinned. "I won't tell if you won't."

>"Only so long as you give me something not to tell about. Owwww! You cheeky devil!"

>"Shhh. Not so loud. Besides, it was only a little pinch."

>Releasing her hands from behind Haruka, Michiru let the taller girl lean back against the stack of gymnastic mats too. They had only been dating for a short while, and it had never really been an official sort of thing. They just seemed to find each other the perfect fit, the right companion at any time of the day. Despite the recent developments in their relationship, the two had known each other for several years, and Michiru could read the faint tenseness in Haruka's face that most people would have missed.

>"There is something worrying you, isn't there? It's not me, but something's worrying you. What is it? You'll feel better when you have it all out."

>Haruka squeezed her friend's hand and looked at the ground for a several long moments before speaking again. "I don't know what it is. All day I've had this horrible feeling that something was going to go wrong. You know how it is when you forget your keys or something? You wander around all day, trying to figure out what is missing, but it only dawns on you when you get home."

>Michiru nodded silently and let Haruka continue. "It's like that, only... More. I'm not sure what I mean. It's like all day long, I've been waiting for someone to say: 'Hey guess what today is?' Or even: 'Wake up, Haruka. It's all a dream.'"

>Rubbing Haruka's hand between her own, Michiru delicately sought the correct words. "I know you're not worried about the test today. You're never worried about them." Ignoring Haruka's snort of derision, Michiru continued. "I think I know what you're feeling. Ever since I woke up, I've been thinking that something important was going to happen today. Or... Or more like it was going to happen yesterday, and I've already missed it."

>"That's it! That's it exactly. There's all this big wait, but it's already happened."

>The girl with flowing river-green hair frowned. "But if it's happened, why are we waiting?"

>"Hey! Don't frown, you put lines on that pretty face!"

>"Oh, and I suppose you think you could provide a distraction?"

>"I could _try_... That is, if you really wanted me to..."

>Lunch passed far too quickly. By that night, neither of them had discovered what it was they were waiting for, nor had they found any clues to a momentous event that had passed them by. A week and more would pass in conventional bliss, but nothing would come of their feelings.

>* * *

>"Hello, Ranma-kun, Akane-chan. How was your day at school?"

>"Good thanks, Kasumi."

>Akane scowled at the man everyone insisted was her fiancé. "Well, other than having to be around this idiot all day, mine was just fine."

>Watching Akane stomp off to her room so that she could get changed,

Ranma settled himself against a wall and watched Kasumi for a moment. She was tidying again, and it made Ranma worry that tidying and cleaning was all she did, even when he was not around during the day. "How was your day, Kasumi?"

>"My day was very nice thank you, Ranma-kun. We had several lovely little birds come and visit the Koi pond today. They really seem so happy. I think it must be because you and your father keep stirring up all the little worms for them when you fall in."

>Watching Kasumi's beatific smile, Ranma nodded nervously. Did anyone else ever pay that much attention to the birds and things, or was it just his someday sister-in-law? Not that he would want to marry Akane or anything at all like that. It was just...

>"We got another letter today from one of your little friends. It's so nice how Ryoga-kun tries to stay in touch when he goes training."

>Taking the letter, Ranma smiled at the eldest Tendo daughter. It was hard to do anything else in her presence. She was just too kind. Almost like the mother that he never had. "Kasumi, Ryoga gets lost. It's not like he means to go somewhere."

>"But he still finds time to send his friends mail. That's so sweet."

>With a deadpan voice, Ranma hated to burst her bubble, but he felt she deserved to know the truth. "It's a death threat. He says he's going to be here tomorrow and he's coming to kill me."

>Kasumi's eyes sparkled as she hid a small laugh with her hand. "Oh, that Ryoga. He's always so funny."

>Ranma might have been going to say something else, but his father chose that moment to come into the room. Ripping the letter out of Ranma's hand, he stared down at it for a few moments before thumping Ranma over the head with one meaty hand. "Boy, you are a disgrace! A personal challenge is the deepest commitment! You should be training, striving to better yourself. While Ryoga has been off forging his body on the road as Tendo and I once did, you've been lazing around the house. You've gotten soft, Boy!"

>"Gotten soft? What's all this then?" Ranma attempted to poke his father in his stomach. While it was a considerable target, the elder Saotome skipped back out of range and waved the letter at Ranma.

>"Boy, you should learn to respect what your father teaches you. Why, the only thing that's more important to a martial artist honour than a challenge is obeying his parents and marrying Akane. If you---"

>When Ranma kicked his father into the pond, he idly wondered whether Kasumi was right. They certainly did stir up the dirt in the pond, and they were always digging divots out of the grass. Maybe the birds did like them, but he would have bet all his savings that the Koi hated them with a vengeance.

>"You were about to say somethin', Old Man?"

>The dripping panda held up a sign, but Ranma had already turned around and missed it. At the sound of footsteps, he looked back inside to see Akane walking down the stairs. Sometimes he wondered why she bothered to get changed after school. The school uniform was a long dress, covering a white blouse. Well, now she seemed to have changed into a reddish-pink dress of almost exactly the same design. Just to really stand out, rather than wearing the white blouse, it was a yellow one. Yellow socks too, he noted absently. Well, even if it did look good on her, no-one would ever accuse a tomboy of having clothing sense.

>"Hey, Akane! Did the school just change its colours or what?"

>A serving tray in his face was the only reply that she deigned to give. By the time he had prized the tray away so that he could see again, Akane was already strapping on her shoes. As he dropped the tray on the table again and wandered over to stand behind her, Ranma idly noted that she was not wearing the green jumper that she favoured with this combination. That must mean she was only going out for a little while. Nothing to worry about then.

>"So wotcha doin' tomboy?"

>Without even looking, Akane swept her right arm backwards to where she knew he was standing. Growling in frustration at the ease that he jumped her strike, she continued avoid looking at him and buckled the strap on her second shoe.

>"If you really must know, I'm going out to shopping for a while. It's Yuka's birthday next week, and unlike some people, I actually care enough about others to remember these sorts of things and get them a present."

>'I wonder if she knows my birthday', Ranma thought as he watched her stand up and look around. 'I know hers. Already got my money saved up and everything. Know exactly what I'm gunna get her this time.

'Course she needs a beauty treatment more than she needs what I've got planned, but hey, not everyone can look as good as I do.'

>"You ain't goin' too far are you? You know they still got problems with demons and stuff."

>"Right, Ranma. That happens, what, once a week or something? Besides, everyone knows all you've got to do is run for a while and the Senshi will get it. It's not like I'm stupid enough to try and take one on or something."

>"Hey, are you saying I'm dumb enough to try? Not that I'd loose or nothin', I just got better things to do with my time, is all."

>A sign caught Ranma unawares and knocked him to the ground. Spinning it around, the panda looming in the entry way let Akane read what it said. Looking from the supine Ranma to the smiling bear, she kept her face neutral. "You're taking Ranma away for training?"

>"That's right! Ranma needs--" The panda spun the sign again. "To catch up with Ryoga."

>"Whaddya mean, 'catch up'?"

>"Did you see this coming?"

>"See what, you stupid old bear?" While he was busy yelling at his father and trying to read the next sign, Genma was using the opportunity to catch him with a surprise hit to the back of the head. With Ranma unconscious at his feet, the huge furry form bowed to Akane and presented another sign. "Have an nice time." Then: "We'll be back soon."

>Watching the panda drag its unconscious son through the house, Tendo Soun could not help but comment on the matter. "Saotome-kun. Would it not have been wiser to allow Ranma to escort Akane as she went shopping? You know what girls like for presents, jewellery, things like that. Perhaps Ranma might have been spurred to buy her an engagement ring if he saw the right one while waiting for her in the store."

>Nodding its head, the panda growled something briefly. Thanking Kasumi again as a human, he pushed his glasses back onto his nose and let some of the hot water drain off. "True, true, Tendo-kun. But just remember this:"

>Genma struck a pose and pointed at his son. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder!"

>Sitting down again, Genma casually leaned an elbow on his son's head

as he spoke. "While I am sure that my ungrateful son loves your daughter and is just waiting for the right moment to marry her, I think this will help them along.
"Think of it. A week apart. I will work on Ranma's training, and the whole time the two of them will be apart. After a week without seeing her loving smile or feeling Akane's tender touch, the boy will be begging to return home. Why, I bet that by the time he is back, Ranma will be tearing his hair out that he was ever separated from her."

>
There was a sudden motion, and Ranma appeared in front of the two men with both of the Saotome's backpacks already full. "A week without that tomboy? You got yourself a deal! Let's go training, Pop."

>
Slightly taken aback by the new enthusiasm, Genma paled on his brilliant plan. Something that Ranma liked obviously must have holes in it. "Wait! Wait! I've just remembered! What about Ryoga! We should stay here and train!"

>
"Ha! You can't get out of it that easily, Old Man! Ryoga ain't gunna be here for a week at least. Come on! We're goin'!" Dragging his now reluctant father, Ranma marched out of the house. Akane could take care of herself easily enough. No matter how tough the demons were that sometimes came around, they were pretty rare. The chances of one of them showing up was pretty slim. Besides, a tomboy with legs as thick and covered in muscle as her should have no problems running away from one.

>
A week with Akane or any other fiancées? It would be paradise, even if he did have his old man along.

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* * *

>
Setsuna screamed in agony.

>
More precisely: Sailor Pluto screamed in agony. The agony that only a Guardian Of Time could possibly know. Clutching her aching head in pain, Sailor Pluto staggered back to her feet and braced herself with the time staff. She had not even realised she had fallen down until she needed to get up, the pain had been so great. Something had gone wrong. Something had gone fundamentally wrong in time.

>
The pain that had been caused when the Dark Moon Family had inserted themselves into history had been bad enough, but that was the sort of paradox that the guardian of the Gates Of Time was there to protect against. She had used all of her power and limited their invasion to a time when the Sailor Senshi existed and were available to fight them. She had also managed to shut down almost all of their access to the time stream.

>
Only by expending huge amounts of dark energy could Dark Moon Family travel through time at all. But they were, and it was hurting Sailor Pluto badly. Something this strong... something like this meant that they had not only crossed time when they should not, they were violating the very laws of causality.

>
Looking through the Gates Of Time, Sailor Pluto shuddered. Violating causality? They were ripping the very concept to shreds! Causality required that cause preceded effect. That was normally a pretty easy thing to do; drop a rock off a cliff and it falls. Tell someone that their loved ones were in danger, and they go to try and help. But... what if they could travel in time? They would arrive before there ever was a danger, they would never have needed to go back and save their friends. Paradox.

>
When Prince Diamond had returned to the past, he had not returned with the usual linear increase, he had left before anyone arrived to tell him to leave. Prince Diamond, Black Lady and the Wiseman had all returned to a time over a week before the Senshi and Small Lady had gone to the future. That was the agony she had felt. A

wave of paradox had rippled out of the Gates and struck everything within the time stream.

>
When Emerald - one of Prince Diamond's loyal but evil servants - had returned to the future, she had returned as a failure. It had been her mission to open nexuses in Sailor Moon's present that would allow dark energy from Nemesis to be sent through. Nemesis was the giant asteroid that the Dark Moon family had been exiled to by Neo-Queen Serenity, and it was their base as they attempted to usurp the queen's power.

>
Prince Diamond's plan was simple and elegant. All the best plans involving time travel were simple, things were confusing enough as they were. By going back in time to Sailor Moon's present, they planned to bring dark energy from Nemesis in the future to Tokyo in the past. Once they had gathered enough dark energy at their chosen time, the Dark Moon family would have been able to run rampant over Sailor Pluto's protection of the time stream. When that happened, Prince Diamond would reign supreme.

>
With Pluto's power broken by the masses of dark energy in twentieth century Tokyo, Prince Diamond had intended to bring Nemesis to Earth in that era. With the mighty power that he possessed, he would have been able to prevent Sailor Moon from ever being able to found Crystal Tokyo. The future that Sailor Pluto was striving to protect would have been destroyed without ever having existed.

>
The hard work of Sailor Moon and her Senshi had been all that had stopped the first two attempts of Prince Diamond's people. First Rubius, then Emerald had been defeated. Rubius had died, but Emerald had returned to the future to let Diamond know the details of her defeat. Fearing that Chibi-Usa's mother, Sailor Moon herself in the future, was in grave danger, all of the Inner Senshi had followed Emerald to the future.

>
All of this unwarranted time travel had brought untold pain to the Guardian of Time, as she strove to help the time stream stay whole and undamaged. Normally there would be no problem, especially since Emerald had died not long after her return to the future. Unfortunately, Prince Diamond and his retinue had decided to make another trip. It was that third fateful trip backwards that caused the damage.

>
In the time that Prince Diamond was travelling to, Emerald had only just arrived. She was still alive, and had hardly even begun her reign of terror within Tokyo. By returning to the time when she was alive, Prince Diamond would be able to lend her his greater power and greater intelligence. Now the possibility existed that she would not fail. Further, from Prince Diamond's point of view, he would have seen her dead, and now she would be alive again.

>
Such a catastrophe would endanger the entire process of time. The very sequence of cause and effect was endangered. When this happened, ripples of paradox would appear within the time stream. Normally these were tiny eddies, unnoticed by anyone as people's wishes or strange events modified time slightly. An event of this magnitude would cause paradox ripples that would change reality spontaneously. From her position outside of time, Sailor Pluto would be in the perfect position to witness these changes... She was also in the perfect position to be struck by the immeasurable energy that these paradox waves represented.

>
Feeling her strength returning after the impact of that first wave, Sailor Pluto raised her time staff. She might not be able to fix what was damaged, but she could prevent any further travel to this period... at least for a while. The time stream needed to heal itself.

>
As she was about to insert her staff into the time stream and seal the corridor of time, her blood ran cold. There, moving through time, were the Inner Senshi. Her Queen, her friends, the only reason she had stood vigil on this accursed Gate for thousands of years. If she sealed the time stream now, they would be lost forever. Small Lady would never come into existence; the Dark Moon Family would never have come into existence. This whole chain of events would unravel, and centuries of the time stream would collapse in a paradox.

>
Her momentary hesitation allowed the Senshi to drop out of the time stream and back into 'reality'. Even as they vanished from her sight, there was a bright, brief flash.

>
"NO!"

>
The Senshi had gone to the wrong time! They had followed Prince Diamond! Back into their own past, Days before they left, in a time before they even knew they could travel to the future. Scrambling backwards from the Time Gate, she tried to shut the massive doors, but already she could see it was too late. The damage had been done.

>
Out in the time stream a ripple had formed, like dropping a pebbling into water, but the time stream was no ordinary water. As the first small wave washed over her, Sailor Pluto was thrown back from the Gate by the impact. Temporal energies blasted through the Time Gate like a blast furnace, ripping and tearing at the fragile reality she lived in. In her position as Guardian Of Time, Sailor Pluto was intimately linked to the time stream. She could feel it as no other living soul could. When the first minor ripple of the paradox rolled over her, her mind exploded in agony, and her stomach clenched in nausea.

>
After writhing on the floor for several minutes - subjectively - Sailor Pluto tried to come to grips with what had happened. A glance showed her that this was the first of many paradox ripples, and they were getting bigger. Already she could see damage occurring to the timeline. The duplicate Senshi had vanished, leaving only those that had been time travelling. She had almost located another eddy that was beginning to form when the next wave of paradox washed over her.

>
She opened her eyes. She had no idea how long she had been out, but she needed to see when the next wave would hit. Rolling to her hands and knees, Sailor Pluto's stomach revolted, and she lost the struggle to maintain both her dignity and her lunch. Judging by the blood staining the floor now, she would not survive a larger wave.

>
Crawling over to the Gate, she looked into the stream at where the eddy had solidified. No! They could not start yet! The Inner Senshi could not handle that sort of enemy as they were, let alone face the Dark Moon Family and the Death Busters both at the same time. It would take months of preparation and training for the young girls to master the powers that they would need to be able to battle Mistress 9's team of Witches and the Daimons that they controlled.

>
Sailor Pluto was the Guardian Of Time. It was her job to prevent these sorts of things. She had tried, the Kami knows she had tried, but she had failed. The best she could do now was descend into the right time and try to repair the damage.

>
As the next wave was about to crash over the Gate Of Time, Sailor Pluto knew there was not enough time to do her job properly. All she could do was her best, and hope it was enough. In the one movement, Sailor Pluto exerted her full power. Maybe... just maybe, she saved the world.

>
As the image of the oldest Senshi faded from the no-space between time, the wave crashed over her. Amidst the indescribable agony and body wrenching power, Sailor Pluto sent the summoning order to the Outer Senshi. Perhaps, even without her training and guidance, they would make the difference needed in this world gone mad.

>
As she left, Sailor Pluto also sealed the Gates. That would stop anyone entering from here, and the chaos in the time stream would lock them out there. There would be no return for Prince Diamond in the near future. Exerting what little power was left in her dying body, Sailor Pluto acted as oil on water to the time stream. One week backwards, that was all that was needed. If she could provide the help the Senshi would so desperately need... Perhaps she could limit the damage to what had already occurred...

>
* * *

>
Kaio Michiru was playing the piano, thinking of the recital she had coming up in two weeks. Today at school she and Haruka had both felt the strangest feelings of deja-vu and premonition. It was as though they were waiting for something, but it was not the first time they were waiting. She was midway through a phrase when the summon call to the Outer Senshi hit her like a lightning bolt from a clear sky.

>
A small portion of ancient memories had flooded her system when they cut off like a projector out of film. Gasping in shock, she held her head. She knew things... many things... terrible things from history. A history of a Kingdom that was burned to the ground by invasion. She also knew that the Earth was in danger again. That was all she knew. There was a threat out there, and she was needed. So was Sailor Uranus.

>
Who was Sailor Uranus?

>
All her battered memory could return was an image of love and friendship. Sailor Uranus was someone she had known before. Someone she loved. But... who?

>
A violent crashing sound from the next room and brought her attention back to the present. Running across the expensive wooden flooring, Michiru ran to the door then cautiously put her head around the corner. There was a tall woman lying on the floor. If Michiru's first guess was right, she must have fallen out of mid-air and landed on the side table, smashing it, and the expensive vase and flowers on it. But that was impossible... wasn't it?

>
Cautiously walking over to the motionless woman Michiru studied her. She had very long green hair, and a mature face of indeterminate age. Her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow and she seemed to be unconscious. As Michiru took in the hideous burns down the right hand side of the stranger's body, and the way blood still trickled from her ears and the corner of her mouth, she thought that perhaps unconsciousness was a blessing.

>
Michiru had almost dialled an ambulance for the strange woman when her new memories brought her to a stop. Sailor Pluto: Guardian Of Time. This was one woman who she could not afford to place in the hands of the normal hospital system.

>
By the time Michiru had placed the woman in a bed upstairs and was tending her wounds, some of her memories were beginning to sort themselves out. This was Sailor Pluto, and she was Sailor Neptune. Somewhere out there was Sailor Uranus, her closest friend and partner. When next they met as Senshi, Michiru would be able to identify her. Blue skirt and yellow bow. She would have two allies when Sailor Pluto recovered.

>
Michiru held her aching head and tried to remember some more details. She must know Sailor Uranus. Everything could depend on it.

After a time, she gave up, shaking her head disconsolately. Relaxing on the stool near Pluto for a few moments, Michiru brought the image of Sailor Uranus into her mind and held tightly to all of the warm feelings that went with it. She loved her. She could not remember who Sailor Uranus was, but she knew that she loved her.

>
When she had started dating Tenou Haruka a few months ago, Michiru had not really thought of herself as a lesbian. It was just Haruka, she told herself. Haruka was just so perfect, anyone would love her. She was not really a lesbian; the only girl she loved was Haruka. Now that she had received some of her memories from when she was Sailor Neptune, Michiru wondered about her assertions. Smiling slightly, Michiru calmly decided that if being a lesbian meant that she found someone with whom she shared such a great love, there was no problem at all.

>
Both Sailors Neptune and Uranus were women, there was no doubt about that. Michiru was entirely willing to admit that she was Sailor Neptune, the memories in her head refused to allow her to believe otherwise. Fighting down a momentary fear, Michiru sincerely hoped that whoever Sailor Uranus was, also received sufficient memories. When they met - Michiru was sure that she and Uranus would meet all too soon - she knew that she might be able to last for all of ten seconds before she fell in love with Sailor Uranus all over again. There was simply something undeniably attractive about the blonde warrior that drew Michiru to her.

>
It pained her to this what the arrival of Sailor Uranus would do to her relationship with Haruka. Admittedly, both targets of her affection were tall blondes, but the chances of them being the same person were almost nil. Michiru had been alive long enough to realise that some things seemed to happen by luck, but others are fated. The thought of her current love being the same person as she knew she would come to love in the approaching months was more of a coincidence that she thought that she could accept.

>
It would hurt Haruka dreadfully when they broke up. That in turn would hurt Michiru, but there was nothing that she could do about it. She knew in her heart that her love of Uranus was destined. It was written in the stars, set in the very planets that powered the two magical girl defenders. She knew that she would love the other Senshi, and there was nothing that could stop it. Nothing could keep them apart, not distance, not hardship, not even war or destruction...

>
If she was really lucky, she would never see Sailor Saturn. From what little her memories contained, the girl was the Senshi Of Destruction. She was the one who held the Silence, the power to end the world. Alone, she could undo any good that the rest of the Sailors combined could do. All weapon, all business, and no compassion. That was all she could remember of the Senshi Of Destruction. She might be wrong, but against that sort of risk, there could be no middle ground. Sailor Saturn was either on Saturn, still asleep or a threat. With unknown enemies teeming around them, they could ill afford the vigil necessary to ensure that Saturn kept her peace.

>
Stopping part way through the job of cleaning Pluto's wounds, Michiru paused with an intake of breath. She knew who their enemies must be, and she only hoped that Sailor Uranus would come to the same conclusions. For the last few weeks, demons of some sort had ranged unchecked through Tokyo, killing on a whim. The papers claimed that they were lead by a woman of incredible power calling herself Kaolinite.

>
The next time Kaolinite decided to attack people, she would have a surprise in store.

>
* * *

>
Ranma followed Akane into the house and watched as she walked up the stairs ahead of him. Her strength and training seemed to give her that extra spring in her step as she walked. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, he admired the way that her calves looked so firm and trim, not like some of the other girls at school, who seemed to be about as thin as his father. Ranma shuddered at the thought.

>
"Good idea, Akane. Better change into somethin' more nicer or you'll never get a husband. Somethin' like a robe and a veil. Don' wanna scare 'em off too quick, do ya?"

>
The slamming of her door was the only answer he got, so he turned around and grinned. He had to remind her every now and again how things were, otherwise she might start to think he liked her. Ranma snorted. Him, like a tomboy? Not much chance of that happening.

>
"So Kasumi... What's up?"

>
Kasumi smiled, and Ranma could have almost sworn that he heard little birds start chirping in the background. "Just a little cooking and cleaning. Oh, your little friend Ryoga-kun sent you a letter today."

>
"Kasumi, Ryoga's not exactly my friend. You know he's always trying to kill me an' stuff."

>
Impossibly, Kasumi smiled even more. "Isn't it nice? You two are always playing around. Such good friends!"

>
Ranma waited a few moments for Kasumi to give him the letter, but she seemed to be concentrating on cleaning the tatami mats in the main dining room. Hating to interrupt her since she was the one that seemed to do all the work here, Ranma coughed slightly. "Oh, yes, Ranma-kun? Are you after a snack? I could make something for you if you like."

>
"Nah, I was just wonderin' if you had the letter..."

>
"Oh dear, I'm sorry. Your father took it already. I think he was saying something earlier to Father about a training trip for you." Kasumi was so distraught by her perceived faux pas that her smile dimmed down to a level associated with normal humans.

>
Turning to search for his father, Ranma was greeted by the weight of a full pack slamming into his chest. Acting on reflex, he caught it, and managed to stop himself from stumbling into Kasumi.

>
"Sloppy, Boy, very sloppy."

>
"Aw, shut up, Old Man."

>
"This..." Genma flourished a piece of paper. "This is a letter of challenge. A man to man duel. For the honour of the Saotome school of Anything Goes Martial Arts you must accept this challenge and defeat your opponent!"

>
Holding his pack in one hand, Ranma tried to snatch his unread mail back, but Genma moved with a speed defying his bulk. "Wait, Boy! The chances of you beating anyone at the moment is about as slim as---"

>
"As you are?" Ranma supplied helpfully.

>
Pushing his glasses back on his face, Genma looked as serious as possible. "Ranma, it saddens you father to see how slack you have become in your training. So... For the next week, you and I shall train in the mountains. Only when we return will you be ready to defeat Ryoga and his new, secret technique!"

>
"He's got a new secret technique?"

>
"Indeed he has." Genma angled his head to catch the afternoon sun off his glasses and looked serious. "A technique known for its unstoppable power. A technique so strong, that few are capable of

mastering it, and fewer still are capable of teaching it. Only one such as I has---"

>
"You don't know what it is, do you?"

>
"I... Shut up, Boy! Put your shoes on! We leave immediately."

>
"So, we gunna go downtown and see if we can fight a demon?"

>
"Don't be stupid boy! I said this was training. You're nowhere near ready to take on something like that. Of course, I could handle three or four of them, but you still have much to go before you..."

>
Kasumi watched as Ranma walked out the front door with his father and smiled, again. Those two, they always had such fun together. At least this little trip would give the fish a chance to rest. She knew that they must get very tired having to dodge every time Ranma or his father fell into the Koi pond. At least the little birds seemed to enjoy the extra turning the grass and pond received.

>
Speaking of fathers, Kasumi was so proud of the way that Saotome-san was willing to take his son training. She had heard him and Father discussing it after they read Ranma's letter. Genma was so willing to help his son be happy with her little sister that he was willing to go without Kasumi's dinners for a week. Of course, Saotome-san did not know that Kasumi was planning Sukiyaki tonight, but she was sure that he would have been willing to take Ranma away no matter what was on the menu. Saotome-san was good like that.

>
Coming down the stairs, Akane straightened her dress and checked herself again. It was her nice red-pink dress, the one that went so well with the yellow shirt and socks. She knew that Ranma liked it, because he always teased her more when she wore it. Of course, to tease her about it, he had to keep looking at her. Casting her eyes around the room, Akane tried to find her fiance. Not that she cared what he thought, she just wanted to know where he was so she could hit him when he said something stupid.

>
"Hey, Kasumi! Where's the idiot?"

>
"Akane-chan! That's no way to talk about Saotome-san, he's our guest!"

>
"Err, I didn't actually mean Ranma's dad, I meant Ranma."

>
"Oh, I'm afraid that you've missed both of them. They just went out to do some training for a while."

>
Akane bit her lip. This was bad. She had been hoping that she could have convinced Ranma to go shopping with her. True, she was a martial artist and could take care of herself, but sometimes it's nice to have someone along with you. Even if they are an idiot that can't say a single nice thing.

>
With her brows drawing together in anger over the remarks that she knew Ranma would have made if he had been here, Akane staked across the room to the front door. "Well, I'm going out for a little while, Kasumi. I'll be back for dinner."

>
Naturally, Kasumi smiled, nodded and told her to be careful. She even asked if Akane wanted her fetch a jumper, but Akane declined, stating that she would not be out long enough to need it. Going shopping was a bit of a necessity at the moment, no matter how much parts of her quailed at the idea. She was going to Yuka's birthday in a couple of weeks, and she needed to get a present.

>
There was nothing wrong with the shopping itself, but the idea of going out in the evening did set Akane's teeth on edge slightly. Evening was when the demons were most common, and she knew that

things were pretty bad at the moment. Several people had died last night, and the news said that retail figures were going to be down this month because of the impact that it was having.

>
Akane remembered how it had been just a few months ago. Back then, demons were a rarity, and you knew that you could count on the Sailor Senshi to help you. These days that did not always seem to hold true. If you got caught in the same area as a demon, you seemed to be in just as much danger from the Senshi as the demon. She was not sure that she liked the turn of events, but with as many as three attacks occurring in a single night, Akane was unsure what the Senshi could do.

>
Firmly buckling her shoes, Akane stood and glowered at the front door for a moment. The chances of meeting either demon or Senshi was pretty small. Even if she did meet them, she was a martial artist and she could take care of herself. There was no way that some stupid demon or some stupid girls in short skirts were going to keep her from getting Yuka's present.

>
With that resolve firmly in mind, Akane called out a goodbye to her sister and father and set off. All she would need was an hour or so.

>
* * *

>
She was in the car. Her seatbelt was on, keys in the ignition and petrol in the tank. Everything was in place, and by rights, Haruka should have been hurtling down the road at an unreasonably high speed. But she wasn't, she was simply sitting there.

>
Slamming the steering wheel in frustration, Haruka's palms echoed off the soft, absorbent leather. Any other day she would have been down the road without a second thought. Today was the first day that she had been willing to get into a car, let alone try and start it. Everyone has an accident at some time in their life, but for Haruka, the near-accident two days ago was a crushing blow to her pride. It had all been her fault.

>
She had been cruising along, weaving between the traffic, enjoying the feeling of the wind whipping through her hair. Always a confident driver, Haruka cut safety margins to a minimum and below. She had been changing lanes, just scant inches behind a blue Mercedes when something had happened to her. Something that had never happened in her entire seventeen years.

>
She lost control.

>
Without warning, she had been assailed by a storm of sights and sounds, drowning out everything in the present. Wracked by the pain, her hands had instinctively reached for her head. Tragedy had been milliseconds away when the blast from a horn behind her brought her back to the present. Her sight had been overlain with images of paradise and war, and the sounds of traffic only just made it past the orchestra overlaying the blasts of cannons.

>
Reeling in disorientation, Haruka fought the steering wheel. No longer her friend and an integral part of her body, the car seemed a stranger, other cars on the road were enemies to be avoided at all costs. Sweating from the effort of ignoring the onslaught of memories, her convertible began to shudder as her hands worked the wheel by instinct.

>
Unsure whether it was a triple headed demon in her rear mirror or a red Commodore, she did not care. It was approaching too fast for comfort. Popping the clutch and nailing the accelerator, Haruka wrenched the wheel to the left. Past the Mercedes, and confident that it was not really an illusionary demon behind her, she dropped the car back into first and slammed her foot on the brake as she was overwhelmed by the vision of her lover dying in a fountain of blood.

>
By the time she was able to open her eyes again, she was shaking like a leaf and less than two centimetres from a concrete barricade. Pedestrians passing by had looked at her strangely, but not as strangely as she examined herself. That had been two days ago, and this was the first time that she had even sat in a car since then. She had even called a tow truck to take the miraculously unscathed car home.

>
Since then she had been tempted to visit a doctor and check for food poisoning or some sort of drug, but two things stopped her. The first was her memories. She remembered things; horrible things. A kingdom so beautiful and perfect it wrenched her deep inside with the thought that she might never see it again. A kingdom destroyed by fighting; fighting monsters and people with so little humanity in them that only their appearance differed from the monsters that stalked the once perfect streets. Monsters like those roaming Tokyo on an alarmingly regular basis.

>
The only other thing that really stopped her from calling a doctor was her powers. She might have doubted the visions; she might have refused to believe the memories that seemed so strong and clear she knew she must have been there. There was no way that she could doubt her powers.

>
While walking home in the evening light on the night of her narrowly avoided accident, Haruka had sensed an evil. That was the only way that she could describe it. Something that was simply wrong, at odds with the rest of the world, a blot in need of cleaning. If she had been sane, she knew she would have run away immediately. Tokyo's streets were no longer safe at night. But while she had run, it was not away from this evil aura, but towards its source.

>
Running along for reasons she still could not understand, she had held up a stick she had never seen before and said words that she had never heard. "Uranus Planet Power! Make Up!"

>
She was Sailor Uranus, that was clear, but what was a Sailor Uranus? Even after ineffectually fighting a monster until it ran, she still had no notion who or what she was. Even now, two days after that attack, she still had no idea. She was sitting in her own car, frightened to drive, because she was worried that at any moment she might black out again. Worse, this time she might kill someone, not just scare the daylights out of them.

>
Haruka had her fingers on the keys when she felt something. There it was again! It was one of them... a monster, a demon, a spirit of some sort, she had no idea. All she knew was that she might be the only one in Tokyo who could stop it. Uncertain why she was trying to stop it other than it was her duty, Haruka jumped out of her car and again held aloft the small stick that seemed to come from nowhere and disappear back there as soon as it was used.

>
Pounding down the concrete at speeds that would have put an Olympic sprinter to shame, Sailor Uranus moved her head back and forwards, trying to locate the source of the aura she was tracking. Blue ankle boots with low heels would not have been her first choice of running shoes, but they certainly seemed to be giving her no problems. It must have been magic not practice, because she was sure that she never tended to wear heels of her own volition.

>
Going past a corner, she slid to a stop, skidding across the ground a good ten meters as she slowed. With one leg still extended, she crouched on the other to retain her balance while stopping. The whole while she looked around, something as simple as balance no

longer an issue. There! It was close! Just past the wooden fence at the end of the street.

>
Advancing a couple of dozen paces, Sailor Uranus brought her hands together. The first time she did this, it caught her by surprise more than it did her opponent. This time she was ready, and whatever she was attacking should have no idea that it was about to be hurt. "WORLD SHAKING!"

>
Sizzling away from her hands, the yellow magic was true to it's name. A miniature earthquake tore down the street, shattering the wooden fence. A gout of purple blood also flew into the air, making the Senshi grin as she closed the distance. She could not see the creature through the dust cloud, but she knew that it was still around. She could hear twin screams of pain which meant that the creature was moving away.

>
Searching through the smoke, she hesitate a moment. Two screams? But there was only one monster! Something shifted softly under her boot, causing Uranus to look down. Body, unconscious, one; she catalogued it subconsciously. Further investigation tagged it as male, 22-28, and non-combatant. The screaming was definitely coming from: female, conscious, screaming, 20-25, non-combatant in yellow dress. The screaming was due to the fact that her left arm was missing from the elbow down.

>
Sailor Uranus shivered slightly. She did not know what disturbed her the most, the suspicion that she might have hurt the woman, that she had not been squeamish at the sight of the blood and bone, or her general lack of emotion. She felt... distant. There was a job to do, and she was the only one that could do it. Until that demon was dead, Sailor Uranus was the only person to defend Tokyo. She had to find that demon!

>
A tinkling sound as she began to resume the chase gave Uranus pause. Looking down, her patchy recall immediately supplied the name for the item she had literally stumbled across. It was bright, pink and as shiny as the star that it so resembled. A Heart Crystal, it was the physical embodiment of someone's soul. Just by the feel of it, she knew it must have come from the unconscious man on the ground. If she did not return it soon, he would die.

>
Looking down at the Crystal, Sailor Uranus turned it one way then another. To her trained, magically aided eyes, she could see the emotional impurities in his soul. If a soul was pure, the Crystal would have been just as large, but there would have been more space in it. An ordinary person filled their soul with petty things, but someone that was purely good or evil - someone who's simple attitudes and clear emotions were defined by the Crystal itself - someone like this could actually store something there. It took powerful magic to store something in a Heart Crystal, and you risked killing the person if their soul changed too much, but it could be done.

>
That must have been what the demon was after. It was hunting for something. Hunting for a Heart Crystal that was pure enough to have stored whatever it was after. On the other hand, maybe it just wanted their energy, it did not really matter: she just had to stop them. Turning on her heel, Sailor Uranus pointed herself in the direction that she could still feel the evil.

>
With a jerk, she brought herself up. Sailor Uranus could not believe this was happening. She had no trouble fighting demons or discovering she was suddenly an encyclopaedia about men's souls, but she could not believe that she would leave two people like this. She was even intending to run off still holding the Crystal.

>
Forcing herself to turn back to the man and his wife, Sailor Uranus tried to block the feeling of wasting time. Whispering quietly

to herself, Sailor Uranus bent over the man. "I can catch the demon in a moment."

>
"W-What?" The woman was going into shock. Blood loss, not fear, she noted absently. She'll pass out soon.

>
Uranus ignored her and returned the Crystal to the man. He should survive. The woman was looking at her with wide eyes. Blue lips, dilated pupils and shaking hands. Definitely shock. "Does it hurt?"

>
In confusion, the woman slowly focused on the Senshi. "W-What?"

>
"Does your arm hurt?"

>
"M-My arm?"

>
For the first time the woman looked down at the stump of her arm. She must have grabbed it unconsciously to staunch the blood, because she took on a horrified look of amazement. Sailor Uranus smiled. It was good that the shock was still blocking the pain. Uranus had no way to anaesthetise this other than knocking her unconscious, and that would be very dangerous given her blood loss.

>
Uranus pointed behind the woman. "Look over there."

>
As the woman turned, Sailor Uranus grabbed her ruined arm and placed the palm of one white glove over the end of it. Obviously the nerves still worked just fine, because the woman convulsed in pain and began to scream as Sailor Uranus began to channel magical power to cauterise the wound. The smell was terrible, and the pain must have been worse, because the woman was flailing around like a puppet in the hands of an epileptic. Uranus wondered if she would ever get the blood out of her glove.

>
With the wound burnt closed, there was no danger of the woman dying. Her conscience salved and her good deed done for the day, Sailor Uranus raced away from them. The demon had left a clear path through the alleys, so it was no problem to track. Within seconds all thoughts of the wounded civilians had been erased from her head.

>
When she came out onto the street, the demon was battling with another woman dressed almost the same as she was. Rather than Sailor Uranus' blue skirt and ankle boots, this person seemed to have a green motif that matched nicely with her hair. While she powered up her World Shaking, Uranus idly noted that the woman's shoes were actually sandals with long ties holding them to her feet and ankles. The unmistakable similarity in their uniforms must have meant something, but she was not sure what.

>
Releasing her World Shaking, Uranus guided it half way to it's target before making it veer off, avoiding demon and Senshi alike. A shop front exploded, sending books and paper everywhere, but Sailor Uranus did not even see it. Her eyes had locked with that of the other Senshi, and suddenly they both knew.

>
"You're dead... I saw you die..."

>
Sailor Uranus shook herself. Who said that? Herself or Sailor Neptune? The other Senshi had a name now, and worse, she had a history. She was a dead woman, brought back to life to torment Uranus. She was a woman that Uranus had once loved more than life itself, and now she was back. But Haruka already had someone else, and no matter how much she remembered her love for this dead woman, there was no way that she would throw Michiru on the scrap heap for the sake of some dead memories.

>
Of course, if they were both interested...

>
The rest of the world snapped back into focus when Sailor Neptune moved suddenly. "It's getting away! We can talk later!"

>
Side by side they ran down the street. Garbage and shopping bags littered the streets where the civilians had already run, but from the course the demon was taking, it would be back amongst them shortly. At the corner, both of them turned at exactly the same time, keeping step even as they ran at full speed. One more turn, and they were on another main thoroughfare, finally having caught up with the demon.

>
Even their brief moment of hesitation earlier had cost them dearly. The crowd was fairly thin, other than two girls, neither older than twenty. One of them was curled into a little ball, shaking in a doorway. The other was draped over the demon's arm as it extracted her Heart Crystal.

>
"Hit it! It's after those Crystals!"

>
World Shaking and Deep Submerge hit the demon in a pyrotechnic display that knocked it head over heels. It was bleeding lightly from some wounds, but it was still entirely combat worthy. With a lurch, it got back to its feet. First one, then two steps in their direction. Without warning, it turned and looked up at a woman in a short dress standing on a building. Both Senshi looked up at her too, only sensing her power now that she revealed herself.

>
"Daimon, return! I, Witch Kaolinite, command you!"

>
In a shimmer of light, first the Daimon, then Witch vanished. They were too late to hit the Daimon, but they may have been lucky enough to have hit the woman. Certainly the edge of the roof bore sufficient damage to testify to their efforts. At least their enemies had names now.

>
"Sailor Uranus! Are you OK? What about the girl?"

>
"I'm fine," she replied curtly. Must remember Michiru. "There was nothing we could do to save the girl. If we hadn't destroyed the Heart Crystal, that Daimon would have it now."

>
When Sailor Neptune turned to look back at the heavily damaged corpse lying on the road, and the other girl wailing over it, Uranus took the chance to flee.

>
"Wait! Sailor Uranus! I need to talk to you!"

>
Ignoring the voice was difficult. Especially since every fibre in Sailor Uranus' body demanded that she go back and hold onto the woman as tightly as she could. She knew that Sailor Neptune would not be able to find her, especially when she changed back into Tenou Haruka and began to walk home at a normal pace.

>
She had a lot to think about tonight, and the night was only just beginning. She had killed tonight. It was her first time, and she was sure that it would not be her last because no matter how she looked at it, she knew she would make the same decision every time. If it cost one person's life to save the world from the Daimons, she would be willing to make that sacrifice. Even her life or Sailor Neptune's life.

>
Comforted only by the sounds of her footfalls, Haruka gnawed on her thumb, searching for an answer. Would she be willing to sacrifice Michiru's life too? She loved her more than the air she breathed. Could Haruka possibly make a decision that would doom the woman she loved?

>
* * *

>
Kasumi replaced the telephone handset into the cradle and looked around. Her father was disconsolately shuffling pieces around the Go board, unable to play a proper game without Saotome-san. Akane was still out shopping, but she did not think they would be able to wait for her. Walking quietly over to where her father sat, Kasumi composed her face and knelt down on the wooden porch.

>
When he did not immediately look over at his eldest daughter, Kasumi reached out a hand and covered her father's fingers as he held

a wooden tile. "Father?"

>
"Kasumi, my dear. You... you look worried."

>
Trying to hide her fears, Kasumi gave a brief smile and lifted his hand from the board. "Come on, Father. I've just received a call from Nabiki-chan. She... she says she's at the hospital and needs us to come there and pick her up."

>
Tears began to pour down his face. "Oh, my poor little baby! Is she all right, Kasumi? Was she hurt?"

>
Standing up, Kasumi lead her weeping father to the front door and began to put her shoes on. "She didn't talk to me long enough, but from the sound of her voice, I think she might have been in pain. Come on Father, I think I just heard the taxi."

>
The ride to the hospital was quiet and free of conversation. Despite her normally effusive and outgoing nature, Kasumi was too worried about her younger sister to engage in casual banter with the taxi driver. It disturbed her to be so rude as to ignore him, but she could not help but feel something terrible had happened to Nabiki. She was always such a determined girl, if she wanted to have her family come to the hospital, the poor girl must be in a terrible state.

>
Needless to say, the only sound that Soun made was that of his crying. He did not let up a single iota even as he was lead out of the taxi and into the hospital. He numbly watched as Kasumi introduced them to the orderly on duty at the admissions. His constant crying received a few strange looks, but as this was the emergency admissions desk, they were not entirely unused to crying casualties or their often distraught relatives.

>
Kasumi looked around and took her father's elbow to lead him down a corridor. She may not have ever been to this section of the hospital before, but she could read the signs easily enough. Not only that, but the kind orderly had given her nice, clear instructions on how to get to her sister's room. Walking down the stark white walls, Kasumi was struck by how similar it was to when she had come to a hospital when her mother had died.

>
Kasumi often reminded herself that the association of her mother's death and hospitals had nothing to do with why she had not pursued a medical degree. It had just been that her family needed her, that was all, Kasumi reminded herself fiercely. Why, just the time that she had spent reading Dr Tofu's medical books and journals would have qualified her as a nurse if she had time to take the exams. Maybe... maybe once Nabiki was better and Ranma and Akane were settled... Maybe then she could spare some time for herself.

>
Stopping outside the door of a private recovery room, Kasumi paused briefly. If Nabiki was in pain, Kasumi knew that little sister would need a strong shoulder to weep on, someone to comfort her. Despite the way that Nabiki tried to keep her distance, the two sisters remained close, largely because Kasumi would never let anyone she loved drift out of her life.

>
"Are you ready, Father?"

>
Soun sniffled slightly, muttered something about his poor baby girl, and straightened his spine. After just a few moments, Soun looked more like the strong figure from Kasumi's youth than she could remember for a long time. "For... For my little Nabiki-chan, I'm always ready. Please, lead the way, Kasumi."

>
Pushing open the door, Kasumi caught a brief glimpse of Nabiki staring straight ahead, lost to some vision that only she could see. As soon as her father and elder sister entered, Nabiki wiped her face clear with left sleeve of her hospital robe and gave them a brave smile. Before her big sister and father were fully into the room,

Nabiki had poured five cups of tea and had placed them on a table beside the bed.

>
The fact that Nabiki had poured the tea left handed had not gone unnoticed by either of the Tendos as they entered the room. The reasoning was quite painfully apparent, in the form of a large white cast that covered Nabiki's right forearm, making any sort of movement difficult, and presumably quite painful.

>
While Kasumi walked to Nabiki's left and took her hand, Soun lost the composure he had briefly maintained. Breaking down in tears, he rushed forward and engulfed his middle daughter in a hug, covering her completely, and causing the girl to release a brief whimper of pain as Soun jogged her plastered arm.

>
"On, Nabiiiiiiikiiiiii! Ohhhh, My darling little girl! Ohhhhh!"

>
He might have gone on for quite a while, but Nabiki freed her good hand from Kasumi and patted him tenderly on the back, hushing him into silence. When he quietened enough, Nabiki turned to Kasumi, allowing the older sibling to see the pain in her eyes briefly.

"Where's Ranma and Saotome-san?"

>
Taking a seat by the bed, Kasumi reclaimed her sister's hand possessively and stroked the short brown hair away from her eyes.

"They both went on a training mission this afternoon. I don't think they will be back for a few more days. Akane's also out shopping. We left her a note, but you probably won't get to see her until you get home tonight."

>
Nabiki quickly looked away, but not so fast that Kasumi could not see more tears. She hoped that her father had not bumped her again. "That.. That might be for the best, Kasumi. I'll speak to him later."

>
Suddenly Nabiki's tone brightened. It was suspicious, but Kasumi had little time to think about it as her sister pressed a cup of tea into her hands. "Drink this. Come on, you too, Father. That's it, drink up while I tell you about what happened."

>
Kasumi thought the tea tasted slightly strange, but that might have just been the brand that they used in the hospital. She became even more suspicious when Nabiki dawdled around in small talk for a few moments. She talked of her afternoon, school, Ranma, anything other than how she got hurt. After a few moments - about the time she reached the bottom of her cup - Kasumi was feeling particularly calm, at the same time noticing that her father had stopped crying while her sister had not even touched the tea in her cup.

>
At last, the middle Tendo daughter got to the point in her story. "I knew Akane wasn't home because I bumped into her when I was coming home. She was just heading out to do some shopping, so I thought that I would join her. You know, big sister looking after her and all that.

>"We went into Ginza for shopping. Did you know that Akane wanted to get a present for her friend's birthday? It was two weeks away, and Akane still wanted to do her shopping now. Damn it! If only she'd waited..."

>Watching her sister beating on the white bed sheet with her good fist, Kasumi reached forward and patted her arm in a soothing manner.

"There, there, Nabiki. It's OK. Maybe you should have some of this tea too."

>"No, the doctors said that with the pain medication I was on it might..."

>When Nabiki was a little girl and got caught with her hand in the cookie jar, she looked just the same as she did now. Kasumi gave her a broad smile to show that she understood, and silently gestured with her eyes to their father. Soun had not noticed the calmative in the

drink, so there was no need to point it out to him.

>Clearing her throat, Nabiki tried again. "We were walking along, and suddenly Akane pushes me out of the way. You know how strong she is! I just went straight over and snap, right on someone's doorstep."

>Soun looked like he was trying to be a fuming tower of anger at Akane's actions, but with the effect of whatever was in the tea, all he could manage was a scowl and a stammer.

>Clenching her fist and letting tears stream freely down her face, Nabiki looked up at her sister, as though seeking something in her face. "It's not fair Kasumi. I was her big sister. I'm the one that was supposed to look after her! She pushed me out of the way. If... If she hadn't done that, it never would have gotten her! It's my fault! If I wasn't there, she... she..."

>Revelation seemed to spear through the two visitors. The reason that Nabiki had called them to the hospital was not for her; it was for her sister. Something serious must have happened to Soun's youngest. Something so terrible that it would reduce his middle daughter to body shaking tears of grief. Nabiki might come across to most people as a cold girl, but she was his darling daughter, and he knew her like no other person in the world. Kasumi might dedicate every waking minute to caring for the family, but he knew that deep down, Nabiki loved her sisters just as much.

>It was much the same as the fact that she had always walked her little sister to school until Ranma came. He knew that Nabiki played tricks on Ranma sometimes, but that was just to strengthen his love for Akane. No matter what she might say, Nabiki had always guaranteed that there was enough money for everyone to eat, and that no-one ever really bothered them. Despite the hidden closeness of the sisters, Nabiki was one of the most collected and in control girls he had ever known. To watch her sobbing without restraint against his oldest daughter caught Soun's attention like nothing else could.

>"Nabiki-chan... Where is Akane?"

>She looked up at her father and tried to answer. She really tried, but no matter how much she worked her mouth, no words came. Sharing a look with Kasumi that instructed her to stay with her sister, Soun rose and left the room.

>He must have been gone for several minutes before Nabiki collected herself enough to continue the tale to Kasumi. All the while, the older girl had just sat there quietly, hiding her own tension so that she could soothe Nabiki. That same kindness made the middle sister - now youngest - feel even worse. With watering eyes, Nabiki cursed herself for being so useless. If she had not been there... If Akane had not sacrificed herself...

>"Don't blame yourself, Nabiki. Akane wouldn't have wanted that. She would want you to remember how much she loved you. Don't think about anything else, just remember she loved you, and we all do."

>Levering herself off the bed so that she could hug her sister again, Nabiki kept a tight grip as she spoke softly into Kasumi's warm shoulder. "You're right. You're always right, Kasumi. If it wasn't Akane, it would have been someone else. They were both out for blood, and it was... We were just... Damn it! She didn't deserve to die for being in the wrong place at the wrong time!"

>"They? Do you mean you got a look at them? Could we call the police?"

>Nabiki made a noise somewhere between a chuckle and a sob. "The police can't do anything. No-one can. It was another one of those demons, it... it did something to her. As soon as Akane pushed me out

of the way, it grabbed her and... I don't know! I don't know what it did! One moment she's kicking and screaming, and the next, she's just going limp in its arm. I mean, she was still breathing, but she suddenly looked all pale and... I could just tell it was going to kill her somehow."

>"So the demon killed her?"

>"It would have, I'm sure of that, it just didn't get the chance. These two girls beat them to it. I don't know who they were; demon hunters of some sort I guess. They wanted to get that demon so bad, they shot straight through her. "They didn't even try and save her, Kasumi! Why didn't they try and save her?"

>While Nabiki again dissolved into tears, Kasumi rocked her back and forwards and remembered how she had done the same thing for Akane not long before when they had lost their mother. Feeling her own tears start, Kasumi returned the hug, wishing that there was someone who could look after her like this when the pain was too great. And their father - their poor, distressed father - he must have been a complete wreck, wandering through the hospital somewhere.

>Soun might have been blinded by tears the first time that he came this way, but now he easily found his way back to the admissions desk. Standing tall and strong, he leaned over the admissions orderly and stared at the middle aged woman. "What room is Tendo Akane in?"

>After he identified himself as her father, the orderly checked the computer. "I'm sorry. No-one by that name was admitted today. Are you sure about that name?"

>"Of course I'm sure about that name, she's my daughter! Look, her sister Nabiki just told me that she was hurt. Now where is she?"

>The orderly started slightly then winced. "Oh, Tendo Nabiki's sister. Tendo-san, I'm sorry. I really am. Yoshiko-san! Take Tendo-san down to see..." She checked her computer again. "To see 496."

>Soun was confused, but followed the silent nurse. The nurse identified as Yoshiko did not say a single thing, simply leading him through corridors of the hospital. His apprehension as he passed the critical recovery rooms peaked and then faded again. Further and further they went, well past the recovery room that Nabiki was resting in.

>When the nurse stepped into an elevator and invited him to follow, he was completely confused. Surely his little girl would not be on one of the upper floors; they were for longer-term recovery. A downwards jolt as the elevator sank confused him further.

>The elevator doors hissed open, and cold air washed over him, making him shiver. Then again, that might have been fear. The sight of gleaming stainless steel, and white tiled floors did something to him that terrified the part of him that was a father.

>Numbly, Soun followed the nurse until she stopped. Turning back to him, Yoshiko looked up. "Tendo-san... I very sorry about your daughter. I was there earlier and... I'm not sure that you want to see this. We haven't had any chance to clean her up yet."

>Without a word, Soun reached past her and grabbed a metal handle. 496 was the number that the orderly had said. That was the number of the draw he was holding. It was too cold down here. Too cold for his little Akane. She always liked it to be warm. So much like her mother that way, always wearing a sweater or something. This cold room was no place for his little Akane-chan; she preferred somewhere warmer.

>With a jerk, Soun opened the draw the whole way. Watching with

amazement, Soun was surprised that his hand did not seem to shake at all. Of its own accord, his hand tried to tug Akane's blouse shut, but it was too burnt. There was not enough fabric left to cover her... To cover all the... To cover...

>
Even her face... It wasn't burned, it was... She had always been so proud of her pretty hair... She used to have so much of it... Gently Soun stroked the left side of her head where her hair hadn't...

>
Ranma used to love that hair cut... His tomboy, he used to call her... Now it was... It was...

>
Looking away, Soun idly noted that one shoe was missing. She was wearing her yellow socks. For a moment, he had thought they had been the one's with red spots, but then he realised those were in the wash and... One shoe was missing. It seemed so important, somehow.

>
"Can you get her a blanket, please? She never liked the cold."

>
Turning back to the elevator, Soun thought it was such a shame she was missing a shoe. She always liked to be so neat.

>
And still the tears could not come.

>
* * *

>
Sailor Mercury threw out another bank of fog and panted deeply. She thought being a Senshi before had been hard work, but this! This was beyond ridiculous, it was all the way to unmanageable. Mercury was a neat and tidy girl; she firmly believed that everything had its place, and everything should be in its place. Maybe she was naive, but she had always assumed that the Senshi's place was among the winners. Ever since coming back from the future, she had learned to question that truism.

>
It had been bad enough that they had been forced to fight Chibi-Usa as soon as they had arrived. Chibi-Usa was Usagi's daughter from the future, except she did not think of herself that way anymore. These days Chibi-Usa called herself Black Lady, and she was one of the minions of the corrupt and evil forces of the Dark Moon Family. The Dark Moon Family were violent insurgents from Crystal Tokyo, far in the future, and they had corrupted Chibi-Usa somehow. Now she was turned against her friends, and not even Sailor Moon's healing had been able to save her when they had their first try.

>
Fighting against one of their own was not what really strained Mercury. It was fighting what seemed to be an endless supply of demented and deformed beasts intent on chaos and destruction. Before they left for the future, they might have fought against one demon a week, some weeks they did not need to fight at all. Certainly Queen Beryl's servants had not managed to do more than that, nor had Emerald, one of the Dark Moon Family.

>
Since Black Lady had escaped them that first day back, they had fought not less than three times against demons. That was only two days ago, and since then they had also missed three more demon attacks. Two of them had been stopped by some mysterious group of girls who tried to dress the same as them, but that had still left one demon attack go completely unopposed. Sailor Moon had been decidedly unhappy with the very idea that there was someone out there ruining the name of the Sailor Senshi. The two girls may have stopped the demons, but the cost in people injured had been far too high. There were even rumours that someone may have died.

>
Catching a glimpse of Sailor Moon through the thinning fog, Mercury wondered just what her leader now thought of her 'good luck'. Yesterday, when they had found out that Emerald had apparently not died in the future as they thought, but was still up to her old

tricks, Sailor Moon had been ecstatic. She had been so sad about the fact that Emerald had been driven mad and died in the future, that she took it as a miracle to actually still be fighting her again. The fact that Emerald's newer and more powerful Droids were keeping the Senshi on the ropes went a long way to dampening her enthusiasm.

>
As the last of her magical fog thinned, Mercury ruminated on the unpleasant fact that while they currently fought Black Lady, there was a better than even chance that demons or those relentless demon killers were active elsewhere in the city. They had considered splitting up, but the vote was unanimous to stay together. Black Lady was just too powerful to let Moon oppose her single-handedly, and, when it came down to it, she was one of theirs. Wiseman may have warped her memories and corrupted her innocent little girl's soul, but deep down, all the Senshi believed that Chibi-Usa was still inside Black Lady.

>
With a clear view up to their opponent - no-one wanted to think of Black Lady as an enemy, despite her actions - Mercury briefly marvelled at the physical changes wrought by Wiseman's magic. Not content with warping Chibi-Usa's mind, he had remade her body into what Chibi-Usa obviously thought a villain should look like. Black Lady's face still bore a definite family resemblance to Sailor Moon, but that only added to the insult of her form. Now the cute little girl had become a tall, mature, sensuous beauty. But it was a cold, cruel beauty. Gone was the bright, happy smile. Black Lady replaced that with a malicious, superior smirk that revelled in causing pain.

>
Where once the little girl had worn a modest little school uniform, now Black Lady wore an evening dress that left nothing to the imagination. It had a slit all the way from her ankle to her hip, and the way she walked and stood showed Black Lady took pleasure in revealing her long trim legs from the darkness of her dress. A dress such a deep red that it could be mistaken for black in most light. The top was no better, for while it covered everything, the thin, transparent material down her arms and across the top of her chest hinted at things you would not have considered had you been looking at Neo-Queen Serenity's royal white gown.

>
A thick, studded, black choker did nothing to harm Black Lady's sultry image either.

>
While she watched her team mates run forward to try and subdue the floating Black Lady, Mercury reflected that at least she was honest with herself. No matter what Mercury would say on the subject, she was secretly just a little jealous that she could not wear a seductive dress like that half as well as Black Lady, and Chibi-Usa was really years younger than her. Mercury nodded as she insisted that she was only a little jealous.

>
The Senshi wanted Black Lady back to normal, and Usagi wanted her daughter back. What they really needed was time: time for Moon to cast her healing without Black Lady being able to escape it. The plan had been simple enough; the rest of the Sailors would hold her down, and Moon would convert her back. Already things were falling apart, and it was only their second try.

>
Mars and Venus were already lying squiring on the ground, felled by the agony of Black Lady's dark energy attacks. Mercury and Jupiter almost had her in their grasp when Black Lady was struck from behind by twin blasts of magic, tumbling her to the ground and bowling over the sailors.

>
Hearing Sailor Moon's shout of rage and the discharge of her Moon Tiara, Mercury struggled to right herself and get back into the battle. No matter where she turned or how she thrashed, she seemed to

be covered in a tangle of limbs and soft, silky black fabric. A few more shouts and some muffled grunts brought Mercury back to her knees, and she shoves a leg off her shoulder.

>
Looking down briefly, Sailor Mercury flushed deep red. All her struggling had managed to push Black Lady onto her back, then Mercury had push her leg away when it had rested against her neck. Needless to say, Murphy's law had dictated that there was now one leg either side of the embarrassed Mercury, and the poor girl was now quite clear on the fact that the only clothing Black Lady wore that was not dark, dark red was the sunny red shoes on her feet. There were some things Mercury really did not need to know.

>
Scrambling back slightly, Mercury pulled the long near-black dress into a more modest placement. It was only when she was getting up to join her friends in battle did she realise that Black Lady still had not resisted in any way. By the movement of her chest, Mercury could see that she was still breathing, but she was obviously out cold, stunned by the magical blast from nowhere.

>
With a grin, Sailor Mercury jumped to her feet and joined the battle. Sailor Venus was off to the side, trying to shake off the last effects of Black Lady's magic, but nothing could keep Sailor Mars from defending Moon when she thought the girl was in trouble. When Mercury saw who their enemy was, she knew that trouble was the right description.

>
There were two girls, dressed like Sailor Senshi, but obviously not part of the team. They were too old for starters, and no Senshi, under any circumstances, would possibly attack Sailor Moon like they did. The Moon Senshi's skirt was torn, and she was bleeding from a few small wounds down her right arm. Despite the way that Mars and Jupiter were targeting the older girls, their opponents seemed determined to beat through the forces of good and finish what they started on Black Lady.

>
When Sailor Moon caught a powerful bolt of green magic straight in the chest and flew backwards with an agonised scream, Sailor Mercury saw red. She had never been this angry before. Even when they had fought Beryl in the Arctic, she had not been forced to watch her leader suffer so much. The piercing sound of Sailor Moon's high pitched scream snapped something inside the normally calm and quiet Mercury.

>
Mercury's Shabon Spray Freezing had never been the most powerful of attacks, and even that was better than the Shabon Spray that she had been restricted to during the battles with Beryl. Even Mercury would have admitted that it was the weakest of any of the girls' magic. Seeing Moon fly backwards in pain like that made something click. Somewhere inside her, Sailor Mercury remembered. With movements as graceful as any ballerina, Sailor Mercury brought her arms in a circle to end them pointed at the horrid green haired woman that dared to attack Sailor Moon.

>
"SHINE AQUA ILLUSION!"

>
It was the first time that Mercury had ever done that attack, but now that she had bowled the woman head over heels with her new found power, Mercury found that she could remember exactly what she did. As with so many things since their reincarnation, it took the proper motivation to cause her to remember. Watching Sailor Moon get hurt gave her access to another of her attacks from the Moon Kingdom. An attack powerful enough to make her a worthy adversary to anyone.

>
Mercury smiled in a most unusual manner, then screamed in rage and charged after the blonde woman who was still fighting. Startled by the ferocity of the friend who was usually as meek as a mouse, the other Inner Senshi were slow on the uptake. However, they were fast

enough to join the chase after just a few stunned moments, running off both of the women.

>
It did not take too long for first one, then the other woman to loose their pursuers. When Mercury returned to her leader, she pondered what she had seen and learned. There was no doubt that their enemies were strong, no doubt at all. Even with her new attack, Mercury doubted that she could match the power of the Deep Submerge that her water based counterpart had used. In her mind, it was only the fact that the women fought as two individuals, rather than a team that allowed the Senshi to run them off so easily.

>
Not everything was easy, Mercury found to her dismay. While she had been busy leading the charge, and Sailor Moon had been disabled, Black Lady had recovered. Since there was not a trace of their converted friend to be seen, the Senshi helped their leader to her feet and vanished into the night.

>
There would be a time and a place to fight these battles again. Of that, Sailor Mercury was certain.

>
* * *

>
Ryoga looked at the familiar wall and silently thanked whatever Kami had smiled on him and provided the guidance to bring him here. He was just a little late for his challenge to Ranma, but no more than a week or so. The fact that his most beloved Akane and his most hated foe Ranma both resided on the other side of this wall allowed him to recognise it for what it was.

>
After all this time, Ryoga had finally found the Tendo Dojo again, but this time, he was the one possessing the ultimate technique.

>
In a single leap, Ryoga cleared the wall. Most people would have hurt themselves just trying to lift his pack or his umbrella, but he could jump with them easily. Confident in his footsteps, Ryoga walked to the house, sure in his own power. There would be no defeat for him this time. Tonight, Ranma would hang from Ryoga's hand as he prepared to deliver the final blow. When he finally proved how weak Ranma was, and how strong he was, Akane would fall into his arms.

>
His vision of perfect bliss was shattered as his chin bounced off a fist-sized rock, breaking his fall. For a moment Ryoga lay there, trying to decide where he had gone wrong. Wasn't it his dream that Akane would fall for him, not that he would fall over in the middle of the yard? Confident in the fact that it must have been some cunning trap laid by Ranma out of fear, Ryoga pushed himself back to his feet and looked around.

>
Evening might have been starting, and the sun was already below the level of the compound wall, but there was still enough light for Ryoga to see the dojo, or what remained of the dojo. What had once been a dojo was now a pile of scrap timbre. A pile of rubbish in the yard, that was all that remained, and it was a stray piece that had tripped him while he concentrated on his love for Akane.

>
With a derisive snort, Ryoga pushed his hair back and continued on to the house. So, Ranma must have lost to another dojo destroyer. Obviously he was not good enough for Akane. Once Ryoga showed everyone the truth of that, he would build his love a new dojo, somewhere that the two of them could raise their little children in perfect happiness.

>
First, Ranma. Ranma must pay. Ranma must die. Ranma must be made to suffer for everything that he had done to Ryoga over the years. Ditching his pack, Ryoga grabbed his umbrella and jumped straight up to the upper story of the Tendo home.

>
With a crash of breaking wood and glass, Ryoga came in through the window, achieving perfect surprise against his dread enemy.

Ranma, obviously stunned by the power and ferocity of Ryoga's mighty

entrance was still just sitting there. Never one to let an advantage slip through his fingers, Ryoga snatched up the pig-tailed martial artist in one hand and prepared to pummel the life out of him.

>
Standing there in the semi-darkness of Ranma's unlit room, Ryoga shook his foe a few times. Nothing. No response. Not even a twitch. It had to be some new trick.

>
"What's the matter, Ranma? Do you want me to kill you?"

>
The voice was quiet. Almost silent, but Ryoga's ears were good. Too good perhaps. "Yes."

>
"What did you say!?"

>
The light snapped on, and Ryoga blinked owlishly in the sudden glare. Turning to the doorway, he spied the sneaky middle daughter. With one arm in a sling, Nabiki stood there, a sardonic smile crossing her face.

>
"Oh, don't mind me, Ryoga. I'd clap if I could, but I'm not quite up to it at the moment."

>
Glancing back and forwards between Nabiki and where Ranma still hung limply in his grasp, Ryoga ventured a nervous smile. "It's... It's not what it looks like."

>
With an exaggerated gesture, Nabiki snapped her fingers and stamped her foot. "Gee, well that's just too bad. You see, what I was really hoping was that you were here to kill Ranma."

>
Now he really looked like a kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar. "Oh... Well... That is...."

>
With a few quick steps, Nabiki stood right next to him. She did not spare Ranma a single glance, she only looked Ryoga straight in the eyes. Nabiki had often stared at him before when she wanted to force him to do something, but this time, there was something different in her eyes. This time, there was death in her gaze, and it frightened him.

>
"How much do you hate Ranma?"

>
"What? There aren't enough words to say how much I hate him! I want to kill him! I want to rip his heart out for what he did to me! I want to---"

>
Nabiki cut straight through his monologue. "But yet you loved Akane. So, how much would you hate someone who insulted her?"

>
Ryoga shook his prey like a rag doll, and Nabiki realised that she might have started too mild. "All right, how about someone that hit her? You know someone that actually punched Akane. Even you know that Ranma would never do that."

>
"I... I'd..."

>
She still had not moved, but Nabiki almost seemed to force him back with the power of her words. "You're right. Not enough. How about someone that beat the crap out of her? Someone that really went all out to hurt her. Not just a fight, but a real beating."

>
Ryoga did not even notice Nabiki's unusually coarse language. Even Ranma slipped from his fingers like a forgotten toy. Walking to the window he stared down at the broken dojo. Was that what it meant? The dojo destroyer had beaten poor Akane? While he had been away training and mastering his new technique, Akane had been alone, without anyone to defend her, only Ranma around.

>
Staring down at his hands, Ryoga could feel the power draining into them. He recognised it now after the weeks of practise. Ki energy: dark, powerful and angry. As his hands glowed green, he closed his eyes for a moment and thought about Akane, Akane hurt perhaps. Maybe... Maybe even bruised on her beautiful, angelic face.

"SHI SHI HOKODAN!"

>
The green beam lanced down and into the rubble of the dojo, sending beams of wood everywhere. When he calmed down enough to notice, Ryoga saw Nabiki standing next to him.

>
Nabiki looked up at Ryoga and then down at the dojo again. Actually, she faced the pile of broken scrap, but she did not see it. She was remembering what it was like once she came back from the hospital. Both she and Kasumi were in shock, but her father really worried her. Every day since their mother died, he had cried. Sometimes he cried all day.

>
He had not shed a single tear since he went to see Akane in the morgue.

>
Now he went to bed after Kasumi and rose well before she did, his whole day spent cleaning or tidying. He would work in the garden, clean dishes for Kasumi or wax the floor. Anything he could do, all day long, just to keep himself busy. He would talk to them, but something had died inside their father. He grieved for his daughter, but he could not seem to cry anymore. Years of tears had diminished their value, so now he suffered in silence.

>
Two days ago they had all been in the living room. Nabiki was staring at a new laptop that she had bought the day she got out of hospital. Kasumi had been helping her father clean what little silverware they had. when they heard happy voices coming through the gate, her father had stood instantly.

>
"Kasumi, Nabiki. Stay here. Whatever you do, don't go outside. I was going to be his father-in-law. It... It is my duty to..." Soun had inhaled deeply, braced himself then went outside to greet the Saotomes as they returned from training.

>
The girls had watched silently as Genma entered the room. He was still full of cheer, excited after having spent a week with his son doing what they did best. Both the girls ignored him as they listened to sounds in the yard.

>
A sliding door opened and closed. The sound repeated itself, then Soun had reappeared in the living room. He nodded at his surviving daughters and opened his mouth to tell Genma the horrible facts when a scream had rent the air.

>
Quite simply it was Ranma. Again and again, he screamed in denial. So great were his screams that they shook the house, but they barely managed to cover the sound of shattering wood. The four of them had been forced to listen to those terrible sounds for over three hours. Every single piece of wood, every beam, every joist. Ranma smashed them one by one.

>
The whole time he screamed in torment, but he had not spoken since.

>
Nabiki came back to the present to watch Ryoga standing there, chest heaving. Ranma understood. She knew that. The dojo had not been there for him, it had been there for Akane. For them. For their children. Without Akane, there was no dojo, no future. Ranma understood that.

>
"So, that's were you've been for the past week. Training."

>
"I... I was training in the mountains."

>
"That's why you weren't here to protect Akane."

>
"I couldn't, I was---"

>
"Ranma was training too, so don't even think of blaming him."

>
Ryoga gestured back at his enemy. "But he---"

>
Nabiki's one good arm grabbed his collar and pulled him down to look him in the eye. There could not have been more than a couple of centimetres between them. "I said lay off him. I need him, and I need

you. He's useless at the moment, but your going to bring him back for me, because I need him."

>
Pushing away from the much bigger boy, Nabiki stalked back to the middle of the room and grabbed a handful of Ranma's hair. Lifting his head up, Nabiki stared into his eyes. They were glazed, but she was sure that he heard every word that she said. Ryoga - she was just as sure - was hanging on to every syllable.

>
"No-one beat up Akane, Ryoga. She was killed. She was killed in cold blood. She threw me aside, saved me, and she died for it. Those bastards murdered her, and I need you and wonder boy here to get my revenge. Do I have your attention?"

>
It only took one look at the green glowing martial artist to know that she had him. Now all she needed was Ranma. From everything she had seen, one of them alone would not have gotten starting odds against the magic wielding bitches that killed her sister, or the unholy demons stalking Tokyo's streets. Both of them, together...

>
Tilting Ranma's face so that he was forced to look at the glowing Ryoga who had gone rigid with anger, Nabiki kneeled down and placed her mouth close to his ear. She whispered, but in the silence of the room, she was confident she could be heard by both.

>
"I know who it is now. I don't know everything, but I know enough. I've got names, and I'm working on places. Now I've also got the two best martial artists in Nerima, maybe Japan, together in the one room. So what's it going to be?

>"Are you going to sit there and sulk? Are you going to run off in a fit of rage? Or are you going to listen to your very good friend Nabiki, as she tells you exactly how the two of you are going to work together?"

>For the first time in two days, Ranma showed signs of life as he lifted himself to stare at her. His grim smile matched Ryoga's, and she could almost feel hope. Hope that these two heroes would be able to get her sister the justice that she could never achieve by herself.

>"Are you two willing to work together to kill every single one of the Sailor Senshi, and every witch and their damn demons?"

>Nabiki had their complete, undivided attention.

>---
End Of Chapter.

3. A Cold Day In Hell

> \

> | Vengeance And A Half |
 _____/

>
Thanks to my pre-readers:

>Ben
aevan - <http://aevan.virtualave.net>

>Kevin D. Hammel - <http://www.anime.sobhrach.com/~khammel/>

>Blood Blade - <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Towers/5920>

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>
What has happened:

>The time travel of Prince Diamond and the Inner Senshi at the end of Sailor Moon R has caused a paradox. Now the Outer Senshi are awake, the Death Busters are active, and the Dark Moon Family are still

trying to conquer the world. In a desperate bid to stop a Daimon from gaining her Heart Crystal, the Outer Senshi were responsible for Akane's death. Now Nabiki has achieved the impossible and convinced Ranma and Ryoga to join forces. But in the quest for vengeance, anything is possible.

>
Part 2: A Cold Day In Hell

>=====

>To someone dedicated to the culinary arts, the quest for a perfect bowl of ramen and the perfect service to a customer can be just as challenging and important as the immaculate performance of a Kata to a martial artist. Shampoo, unfortunately, was a martial artist and not a chef. For her, the endless, Ranma-less days working in the Nekohanten seemed to stretch on forever. The delivery of three excellent bowls of her great grandmother's ramen in a fashion that approximated truly good service did little to raise her cheer.

>A week without Ranma was just too long to cope with. Every time someone entered the store, Shampoo's eyes lit up and she looked over to the door, only to be disheartened as yet another ordinary customer walked in. Last time she had delivered ramen to the Tendo's, Kasumi had told her that she had just missed Ranma. Her beloved husband had stepped out the door only moments earlier, heading off with his father to train in the mountains for a week.

>That had been a full ten days ago, surely he should be home soon! Shampoo gave a sweet smile as she seated the latest customer, but her mind was on Ranma. She knew what it was like at the Tendo's, she had been through this routine often enough. Ranma would come back from his training, tired and hungry. In an evil attempt to poison Shampoo's husband, the violent tomboy there would cook something terrible. Without a doubt, it would take less than a hour from the moment Ranma stepped through the Tendo's gate to when he appeared through Shampoo's infinitely more hospitable door for some real food.

>Filling the newest customer's order, Shampoo backed away from his table and leaned against the bar next to where her great grandmother was having a puff on her pipe. "Is quiet tonight, great grandmother."

>Cologne eyed her charge and smiled on the inside. So, Shampoo thinks to go chasing after Ranma, does she? Strength was not all it took to lead in the Joketsuzoku. One needed brains also, and that was one area Shampoo was oddly reluctant to train. The girl needed to learn compromise and gain equal skills in verbal sparring.

>"But still too busy for only one of us..."

>"Shampoo think not too busy. Shampoo think that..."

>Cologne smiled slightly. Good child, you caught it that time. Never state your intentions too clearly, it makes it too easy for people to see ways around them.

>Blowing a smoke ring, Cologne watched as Shampoo waved goodbye to one of the regulars. "But it is a lot of work to maintain this place."

>Shampoo's brow furrowed. She could tell Cologne was testing her again, but she was not sure what was the right answer to that statement. Shampoo always preferred the simplicity of battle to all this talking. That was why she liked Ranma: he was good at fighting and did not think too much either. Not like Mousse. Mousse was always trying to think of some tricky new attack to catch his opponent unawares. Where was the strength in that?

>When the thoughts clicked into place in Shampoo's mind, her face lit up then immediately schooled itself into nonchalance. Cologne almost burst out laughing, Shampoo was wearing her most neutral expression

that told everyone in the world: I have something devious in mind, so I'm not going to look devious. No, no, not at all, not me.

>Nodding to Cologne, Shampoo placed one finger delicately on her lips and pretended to tilt her head to one side in thought. "Great Grandmother right. Is much work. Is more work with Mousse away today. Shampoo glad she strong, young Amazon. Shampoo handle all work by herself. Let poor, tired Elder to rest, yes?"

>That did motivate a chuckle out of Cologne, but she quickly covered it up with a suck on her pipe. Not particularly subtle, but she was getting better. Cologne just hoped that she did not try anything so obvious as impugning weakness once she returned to their village. A comment like that - made to the wrong person - might very well see Shampoo out in the challenge circle trying to defend her honour.

>Reaching for the bait that Shampoo had dangled so obviously in front of her, Cologne took the chance to let her great granddaughter do the man-hunting she so obviously desired. "Oh, dear! I'm not that old and weak yet! I'll show you, Shampoo! For tonight, I shall run the whole Nekohanten by myself!"

>Perhaps the sarcasm was just a little too thick, even Shampoo noticed and turned her head to look in askance at her elder. "Great Grandmother no sound serious."

>Cologne reached over and patted the young Amazon's hand. "I'm not really, but you're getting better at talking to others. You definitely need to work on the way you suggest things, and you still need to practice your facial expressions, but I see improvement. Now, there are two spare ramen here, getting cold. Why don't you see if Ranma really is at home?"

>"Aiyaa! Great Grandmother so smart!"

>Watching Shampoo flounce off to get her bonbori and the delivery box, Cologne sighed. She felt so old sometimes. Was she really that much smarter than everyone, or had breeding purely for strength weakened other areas that the village's leaders needed?

>When Shampoo ran out the door, Cologne began mixing up some more ramen. What they really needed was a skilled fighter who was also very intelligent. Someone that could strengthen all areas of the bloodline. Cologne did not like the chances of finding any males around here that even surpassed average intelligence. Just to prove her point, a group of six youths had just entered, each loudly discussing the various merits that Shampoo possessed. At least, they discussed those things that teenage boys tended to find most meritorious.

>The journey from the Nekohanten to the Tendo dojo was not a long one, especially for someone of Shampoo's fitness and stamina when mounted on a bicycle. In mere minutes, the girl was standing the transport to the side of the gate and walking inside. Even though she ate it every day, the ramen smelled very good to her, and she knew from experience that her husband would find it irresistible. She just hoped that the violent girl would be there to watch as her husband wolfed down yet another meal of hers. While she hated to see Ranma being struck, every blow that the tomboy delivered brought him one step closer to Shampoo's arms.

>Skirting around the house to where the sounds of fighting emanated, Shampoo ended up at a corner of the house, watching Ranma and Ryoga having another one of their common fights. Watching as the lost boy fought her husband, she was again impressed by the skill that Ryoga managed to muster. Here was a man that would make almost any Amazon proud. Tall, strong, and built like a figure from legends. Yes, Ryoga would make _almost_ any Amazon proud. But never Shampoo, for she knew

that she could never settle for second best, and no matter how good he may be, Ryoga would always be second best to her husband.

>Standing still, Shampoo was trying to decide what was strange about the fight occurring in front of her. Surely they fought all the time, it could not be that. Then it struck her: two things were very odd. First was they were still in the yard. In the whole time they had not started running around the buildings or headed for more spacious grounds where Ryoga could do his more destructive moves like the Bakusai Tenketsu.

>Secondly, strangest of all, they seemed to be pulling their punches. They were not pulling them much, but they were definitely not fighting with their usual all-out intensity. For a moment Shampoo was held by a wild idea. Anyone that did not know them better, might almost suspect that the two boys were sparring, not fighting. True, their idea of sparring would leave most people crippled in the dust, but for these two shining examples of what martial artists can be, it was really only a practice bout.

>Watching them further, and seeing the way that they acted around each other, Shampoo gradually became more and more sure that they were practising, not really challenging each other. Fearing that one of Akane's many suitors may have renounced her - hence allowing the friendlier relationship with Ranma - Shampoo skipped out into the open holding her delivery box.

>"Airen! Shampoo bring too delicious ramen for dinner!"

>Placing the food on the ground, she watched as both combatants immediately made a bee-line towards her. If she timed it just right, she should be able to land right on his lap as he bent to pick up his bowl. Right about.... now!

>With a move like lightning, Shampoo popped forwards and tried to cuddle into his neck. Tried to, that is, because somehow she missed. Blinking several times, Shampoo looked around and spotted Ranma kneeling next to Ryoga, both shovelling the food down their throats as fast as it would go. He dodged her? Ranma had moved around her when she tried to show her affections? He had never done that before. Not only had he never succeeded in avoiding her hugs, he had never previously tried. Something was seriously wrong here.

>Walking back to her husband with a sensual step, Shampoo tried to run a hand through his hair as he ate. Again he avoided her touch, this time scooting backwards with tiny motions of his toes; a technique for movement that he had learned when he studied for the Martial Arts Tea Ceremony. "Airen? What wrong? Why you a... av... move away from Shampoo?"

>There was something cold about his voice when he replied. Something business-like and hard that he had never used before, especially when he was talking to her. "I'm busy, Shampoo. Ryoga's spent all morning teachin' me his latest technique, and now we gotta do some sparring to warm up. I ain't got no time for games now, OK?"

>With that, Ranma finished the last of his ramen and placed the bowl back in its holder. "Thanks, Shampoo. I really needed that."

>She started to reach out for him, but part way through the gesture, she hesitated. Something about him suggested that it would not be a good time to be touching his arm. Not good for her, that is. He did not say anything or do anything. He just stood there waiting for Ryoga to finish slurping the last of the soup before resuming their training.

>"What Airen train for? What Airen train with Lost Boy for?"

>That stopped them both for a moment. Although they had been walking back to the middle of the yard, she halted and slowly turned to face her.

>"Do you see that, Shampoo?" He pointed to the rubble of the dojo. "I did that Shampoo. That's why we're training."

>Shampoo shrugged. It was hard to miss the fact that the Tendo's dojo had been reduced to rubble, but she just assumed that it was a little bit more extreme than the usual damage it suffered. After all, it was only a building. "Shampoo see building in dirt. Why Ranma train?"

>Ranma looked like he wanted to speak, but words would not come. After a moment, Ryoga placed a meaty hand on his shoulder and turned to face Shampoo. "Akane's gone."

>The stupid tomboy was gone? Shampoo did not understand. She thought that the tomboy liked Lost Boy. Why would they only be training now that she was gone? Not only that, but if Ranma took the opportunity to destroy the tomboy's dojo while she was gone, she would still surely notice upon her return. Something was not adding up here.

>"What you mean gone?"

>"I mean... I mean that she's..."

>Ranma interrupted. His voice was still and cold. "He means she's dead. Akane is dead."

>His voice started to break at the end, but Shampoo's thoughts were whirling too rapidly for her to notice. Her main rival was dead? Akane was no more? A smile blossomed across her face as she fully realised what this meant.

>"Tomboy dead, and Shampoo no need give Kiss Of Death? Shampoo so happy! Airen come back to China now? No-one keep Airen with Violent Tomboy any more?"

>Ryoga looked at her aghast. How could she possibly say something so insensitive? How could she be so happy at the thought of her rival being dead? He might have threatened to kill Ranma for so many months, but finding out about Akane's death had changed something in him. He realised that killing Ranma would not bring back the happiness that he had lost. Challenging him, fighting him, that had been real happiness. Seeing how greatly Akane's death had scarred so many people, he had almost been willing to take a vow never to kill again. But that would have let her murderers go free and unpunished. Even worse, if he and Ranma did not stop them, then who possibly could? Countless other people would die in Tokyo before the matter was ended.

>All these thoughts tumbled through Ryoga's head in an instant. In that same instant, he realised what Ranma was thinking. The woman that they both loved was hardly in the ground, and someone was celebrating her death? Ranma had not lived with the thoughts of killing as long as Ryoga had. To Ranma, killing and revenge were still linked in his mind as something just and right. Looking at Ranma's face, Ryoga knew that he could not let the boy act on his impulses towards Shampoo.

>"Run!" He cast over his shoulder as he interposed himself between Ranma and the Amazon. Shampoo instinctively retreated a couple of steps, but confusion and a failure to understand Ranma's hidden nature kept her around.

>Suddenly, Ranma surged forwards. He was fuming and flailing his arms madly, trying to thrash his way through Ryoga, but there was no style, no class to his efforts. Ryoga knew that Ranma could have avoided him and done anything he desired to Shampoo if his mind was clear and he truly desired it. But this Ranma was a different animal. This Ranma simply wanted to grab something and pummel it into

nothingness until his own grief vanished along with it.

>Waving his clenched fists, Ranma glared at Shampoo past Ryoga's shoulder. The whole time he was leaping at her, only to be body checked by the larger boy. "How could you say that you bitch? She was your friend! I loved her! I'm going to find the people that did this, and I'm going to bury them! I'll put them six foot under! There's not even going to be enough left to bury once I'm through with them. You hear me?
"And if you're not with us, you're against us! You understand? Next time I see your ugly face, you better be fighting beside me, or I'll plant you along with the rest! I'll take you apart limb by limb! I'll tear them all to shreds! Do you hear me?

>"Akane! I swear I'm going to send your murderers to escort you to heaven! Every single one of them, all lined up for you! I will not stop! I will never stop! I will fight until they are all dead! Dead! _Dead_! DEAD!"

>By now she was running madly, Ranma's shouts only heard through the distance. It should have been a day of joy, her greatest rival for the heart of a man was dead. Instead, her rival became infinitely harder to beat. Now that Akane was dead, she could do no wrong. While Akane was alive, there was the chance that Shampoo might win Ranma away. Now that Akane was dead, she had Ranma body and soul. His whole life contained nothing but the deaths of the people who killed the woman he loved.

>Leaning against the wall of a building, Shampoo sniffled a couple of times. He had said it earlier, shouted it for the whole world to hear. Ranma had loved Akane. He was willing to sacrifice everything that he had, everything he was, for revenge. Worse still, Ryoga was on his side, and if there was another specialist on revenge that was half as good as Ryoga, Shampoo could not think of them.

>There would be blood on these streets, and - despite the fact that she felt she had lost him forever in those few moments - Shampoo desperately hoped that none of that blood was Ranma's. Whoever had told her that one live friend was worth more than a hundred dead enemies was right. Whoever had killed Akane had surely signed their own death certificates. Even worse, they had signed Ranma's. The man Shampoo loved was dead, and she could only hope that he might come back to life in time; returning someday when this need for revenge had been burnt from his soul.

>Whoever that had been in the Tendo's yard was not the Ranma that she knew. He was gone, sacrificed on the altar of pain. By killing Akane, they had killed Ranma and Ryoga. When they killed the man Shampoo loved - even though they killed him indirectly - they drove that same stake through Shampoo's heart.

>She could not return right now, but she would return. She would return and fight by the side of her husband until either she or their every enemy was dead. She was an Amazon and understood the ways of honour. While she had thought it was a boon that Akane had died by hands other than hers, she would have traded her own life to spare Ranma his current suffering. The Amazons taught that you capitalised on every advantage that you got. If Akane had died in a car accident, Shampoo would have consoled Ranma. But she had not, she had been murdered, and Shampoo had just stained herself in the eyes of the man she loved.

>Pulling out one bonbori, she relished the feel as she tightly gripped its shaft. As an Amazon, she would stand with her husband until their deaths. She did not know who had hurt her husband so, but be they man or beast, they had made themselves an implacable foe. She had once hunted Ranma across the breadth of China and Japan, simply for the slight of beating her in formal battle.

>For hurting her husband, and causing her to stain her own honour, Shampoo would hunt them to their dying breath. You could run, but there was nowhere you could hide from an Amazon on the warpath.

>* * *

>For the last two days, Ami had been walking on eggshells, trying to carefully avoid something that she could not even identify. The Senshi had been back in the present for a week and there was an annoying tickling sensation at the back of Ami's brain saying that something was wrong. Something was out of place. Unfortunately, with the presence of rampaging demons, witches, and evil revolutionaries - not to mention the fact that one of their own was still brainwashed and an enemy agent - it was too hard to actually find out that what her subconscious was saying was actually wrong; there were just too many obvious problems at the moment.

>Now, as she walked down the street to Juuban High School, Ami heard a voice that brought a smile to her face as she returned the greetings. "Hello, Makoto-chan! How are you today?"

>The tall girl gave a short sniff then shook her head and grinned down at her friend. "Better thanks, Ami-chan. I can't believe I had to stay away from school for a whole week just because of some silly cold... Not that I'm really complaining about missing school."

>"Well, I don't think that it helped that we've been running around in the cool air every night since we got back. You just haven't had a chance to properly recover."

>"At least we're winning those fights. This bug has kept me in bed every day. If those Black Moon guys ever managed to do as well as the common cold, we're done for!"

>Both girls laughed appreciatively. They were still smiling happily as they walked through the school gates, only to be immediately brought up short by a group of three teachers. There were both the boy's and girl's physical education teachers, as well as the burly science teacher, the one that like to talk about everything in terms of martial arts. None of the teachers looked happy, and Ami was sure that they were focusing all of their attention on her friend.

>"What are you doing back here, Kino-san?"

>Makoto looked down at herself and looked for something wrong. She was in exactly the same uniform as Ami; bright blue skirt, white blouse a blue sailor style collar; of course, Makoto's was significantly larger to accommodate her extra height. Still confused, she checked her hair to make sure that was tidy; it was still in its habitual ponytail. If she was neat and tidy, what where they complaining about? Surely they were not upset with her because she had been away for a week, sick in bed?

>"Ano... To go to school?"

>Gently, Ami's Phys-Ed teacher reached over and took her elbow, pulling her away from her friend. Makoto moved to join her, but the other two teachers interposed themselves. "You're not going to give us any trouble, are you, Kino-san?"

>Unconsciously, Makoto lowered her chin protectively and clenched her hands into fists. The way that the teachers were holding themselves brought back too many memories of how other fights started for her to be able to ignore it.

>"I don't want any trouble. I just want to get to class." Mentally, Makoto hit herself in the head and said 'Wow, I can't believe I said that.'

>"You know you're not welcome here after what you did. Just turn around and go home. If we catch you trying to sneak onto school

grounds again, we'll call the police. Do you understand?"

>Backing away slightly, Makoto mutely shook her head and looked at Ami in confusion. The pretty brunette just stood there, mouth gaping at what she heard. Everyone stood like that for a moment, until one of the teachers began to move forward, planning on encouraging the unwelcome girl to leave the hallowed school grounds. Seeing Makoto tense at this perceived threat, Ami found her voice.

>"You'd better head off now, Mako-chan. I... I'll see you after school, OK?"

>The words seemed to break the spell that held everyone, and they briefly focused on Ami. Seeing her friend nod, Ami smiled briefly, but that smile turned sour when she watched Makoto sadly turn and leave the grounds.

>As the taller girl walked away, head hanging, the last she heard from the teachers was one of them berating Ami. That alone was almost enough to make her go back and try and teach those snobs a lesson. How dare they talk to her friend that way? And what business was it of theirs if she and Ami wanted to hang out together?

>Most importantly; why didn't they want her at Juuban High?

>Whiling away a whole day with nothing to do was something that Makoto had often dreamt about, but the reality appeared to be less inviting than the dream itself. She could hardly go and visit any of the arcades, as they were not allowed to have children on the premises during school hours. That left wandering the malls nearby, and that was nowhere near as much fun without someone like Minako along to brighten things up.

>Perhaps the worst thing about the day was the simple waiting. The dread of the unknown. What was Ami going to find out today? Why were the teachers treating her like some sort of violent maniac? They had even made sure that they would be able to gang up on her three to one. Makoto could not understand it, she had hardly done any fighting at all in Juuban, and almost all of that was before she met Usagi, happening in the first few days after she transferred there... Actually, Usagi had found Makoto and more importantly, Makoto's well prepared Bento box.

>The end of the day saw Makoto standing on the other side of the street to the school, watching all of her classmates coming out. Strangely enough, those few that showed any sign of recognition all seemed to shy away from her, as though they feared her. This in turn caused the teacher standing near the gate to give her dark looks, but the man could hardly do anything since she was not on the school grounds.

>When she finally saw Ami coming out - obviously having decided to forsake her usual afternoon tutorials in favour of her friend - Makoto brightened into a smile; her first genuine one since she left the school that morning. Giving the girl with deep-blue hair a wave, Makoto straightened up and waited for her to cross. Her smile dimmed slightly when she saw the teacher obviously trying to dissuade Ami from meeting her, but words alone could not stop her friend from crossing the street.

>When Ami reached her friend, she immediately took Makoto's hand and began leading her away at a rapid pace. Even without being told, Makoto could guess that there was no point waiting for Minako or Usagi; with their sterling attendance record, those two were probably in detention making up for time they missed at the start of the day.

>At the speed they walked, even the long legged Makoto was stretched to meet the pace Ami was setting, and her concern was raised even

further by the look of concentration that Ami wore. Once they were a few blocks away from anyone that was likely to hear what they were saying, Ami slowed back to a normal pace and began to lead them back to her home.

>"Mako-chan, have you noticed anything strange since we got back from Crystal Tokyo?"

>"Do you mean anything other than the fact that Emerald is still alive, there's a bunch of killers out there pretending to be us, or someone else is summoning hordes of demons? Other than that, no, not really."

>In a most unusual display of frustration, Ami clenched a small fist and frowned. "No, of course not. You've been sick all week and in bed. I can't believe that I did not notice something was wrong earlier. I've been trying to put the pieces together and I didn't even know what the puzzle was."

>"Err... Was there something I should of mentioned?"

>"No! I'm sorry, Mako-chan. I just feel so stupid for not noticing it before. I think something happened when we came backwards. Things seem to be a little... off."

>"What do you mean? Are you talking about how everyone treated me like I had the plague just because I missed a week of school?"

>"It's not just that, and that's the problem. I think we're going to have to get together tonight, even if we do have to fight something first. We can't afford to keep putting it off like we have been. What we saw at school today was something big... really big, and I don't think that you're going to like it."

>"Hey, come on Ami-chan! I'm Sailor Jupiter, I'm supposed to be the tough one right?"

>"You... You got expelled from Juuban for fighting..."

>Makoto stopped dead in her tracks. "What!? That's crazy!"

>Ami stood in front of her friend and sadly looked down at her hands, unable to meet the other Senshi's eyes. "You got expelled for fighting... with me."

>"No way! You're kidding, aren't you, Ami-chan?"

>Despite the tone of pleading in Makoto's voice, Ami slowly shook her head in negation. "About two weeks after you transferred to Juuban, you apparently attacked me in the playground. You... err... you dislocated my left knee. That's why they expelled you."

>"What!? I'd never do anything like that!"

>Feeling the frantic grip on her shoulders, Ami looked up into Makoto's eyes and could see tears beginning to form there, matching her own eyes. "I know you wouldn't, but... everyone else thinks that you did. That's why they were so upset with you."

>Makoto was stunned speechless, and stayed that way as they resumed walking. Eventually Ami picked up the conversation again, filling the void. "That's not the only thing I've noticed, but it is the biggest. Have you noticed that Luna and Artemis have been missing? Even Mina-chan and Usagi-chan haven't seen them in a week. If they don't turn up tonight, I'm going to get Usagi to try and call them on the communicator. We need to be able to speak to them; they have to know more about what's going on than we do."

>They kept talking, trying to find other areas that things had changed, but with Makoto living by herself, it was not as though she had many chances to notice changes in the world. They had moved onto discussing plans for the inevitable Droid or Daimon attack tonight when a sharp voice rang out across the street, capturing both their attentions.

>"You stay away from my daughter, you violent maniac, or I'll call

the police!"

>Both heads instantly tracked to the sound of the voice and set upon Ami's mother. She was standing at the entrance to the building in which they lived, and glaring at Makoto with a look that could melt plate steel.

>"I'm warning you! Get away from her now, or that's it!"

>Reluctantly, Ami stepped away from Makoto and moved towards her mother. Quietly, so that only Makoto could hear, Ami tried to cheer her up. "Don't worry, she's probably just upset about that school thing. I... I'll see you tonight."

>Hesitantly, Makoto raised her hand and gave a small wave. "See you... Later, I guess."

>Although she knew that she had not done the horrible things that she had been accused of, it drove a stake through Makoto's heart to watch the way that Ami's mother protectively gathered her into her arms, the whole while glaring at Makoto. Past the occasional sound of traffic passing between them, Makoto could hear the words that Ami's mother was saying. Some part deep inside her even suggested that Mrs Mizuno was saying them loud enough specifically so that she could hear them.

>"Oh, my poor girl. Are you all right now? Did she do anything to you this time?"

>Ami said something, but she was facing the wrong way, so Makoto missed it. However, there was no way she could miss the way that the protective mother was directing her hatred at her.

>"It's all right dear. You don't have to try and defend her. She can't hurt you now. Come on in, everything will be just fine now that we've gotten you away from that horrible delinquent."

>When Ami and her mother walked inside, Makoto slowly turned and walked off. It was bad enough trying to fight demons. Why did they have to try and fight everyone else too? It was not fair! Makoto did not have a mother like Ami, she had no-one to stand up for her and say everything was all right. She had to struggle by in the world, and now someone had changed all the rules on her. She had worked so hard to make friends with all the Senshi and be part of the team, and now even that had been taken away from her.

>Makoto just wished there was some way that she could contact Sailor Pluto and find out what was going on. Perhaps she could set everything straight. Maybe Luna would know how to contact the mysterious time Senshi that they had only recently been introduced to.

>Unknown to Makoto or any of the Inner Senshi, at that very moment, an unconscious Sailor Pluto lay on silk sheets in a luxurious bedroom. She was unconscious, and had been so for the whole week. Despite all the efforts of Michiru - which did not amount to much given her reluctance to contact a real doctor - the woman remained in a coma. If Makoto intended to rely upon Sailor Pluto for answers, they may be a long time in coming.

>* * *

>Ryoga cursed his luck as he walked down yet another street that looked exactly the same as the one before it. All this, just because he spotted some woman that looked like Ranma and tried to follow her instead of the real thing. By the time he had caught up with the red-head, and established that she was not the arrogant martial artist, he was already lost.

>Well, he was not lost, he knew exactly where he was: he was right there. It was Ranma that was lost, and Ryoga had no idea where he needed to go to find Ranma. Even if they were on the same side now, fighting to avenge Akane, Ranma still caused him problems. It was all

Ranma's fault, and he was supposed to be Ryoga's ally!

>Looking around, Ryoga mused on just what a difference it made fighting with Ranma rather than against him. Last night Nabiki had convinced Ranma and himself to work together, and today he had seen just what Ranma could do when he was really pushed to it. There were times when even Ryoga had to admit that Ranma was impressive, and this had been one of them, no matter how much that admission stuck in his throat.

>After agreeing to work for Nabiki to find Akane's killers, Ryoga had handed over the scroll that detailed how to do the Shi Shi Hokodan. Ranma had studied it for hours, listening to everything that Ryoga said, only speaking to ask questions. They worked like that for several hours until Kasumi had chased them off to bed like a mother hen.

>Sunrise the next morning saw once bitter enemies standing side-by-side, working on Ranma's mastery of the Ki attack. Dwelling on the loss of Akane, neither boy had been at a loss for the volume of heavy Ki needed to fuel the Shi Shi Hokodan. By the time Kasumi had prepared breakfast for the reduced family, both teenage martial artists were throwing Ki blasts into the rubble of the dojo.

>Having seen the speed that Ranma had mastered the Shi Shi Hokodan, Ryoga was almost glad that he had not challenged Ranma with it. Surely he would have had no more than one or two battles advantage before Ranma would have learned the technique by himself. While Ryoga had no doubt that he was the superior martial artist and that Ranma only managed to win because he cheated every time, he could not fail to acknowledge Ranma's ability. It had taken Ryoga days to master the technique, over a week to reach his current level. Ranma was his equal overnight, with both of them capable of doing the basic technique as detailed on the scroll.

>Neither of them had yet mastered the Perfect Shi Shi Hokodan; the true form of the technique. But what they had would let them fight demons on a more even footing than they had even considered possible a month ago.

>The rest of the day had been spent in the pleasant bliss of trying to beat the stuffing out of Ranma. They had both toned down their blows, but Ryoga had found an almost primeval joy in hitting the smaller boy - even if it was just training. Without Ranma's constant taunts, Ryoga almost managed to avoid the berserker fury that often captured him in battle, and he could feel his technique firming up even as they practised. Today would have been a rather decent day if Shampoo had not come along and ruined it.

>After a short rest and a filling meal by Kasumi, Ranma and Ryoga had been poised to start on the first phase of Nabiki's plan. While she was trying to correlate data - whatever that meant - the two of them were going to patrol inner Tokyo during the evenings, looking for demons on a more-or-less random basis. It was not the best way to do things, but it got them out of the house, and neither Ryoga nor Ranma could bear to sit still and think that there was someone else out there that might get hurt like Akane was while they stayed and home and rested.

>Well, that had been the plan, until Ranma had wandered off without Ryoga and planted that look-alike to fool him. Now Ryoga was wandering around Tokyo, trying to find Ranma or demons or Senshi, or even just an accurate map that showed the right city.

>A cry from up ahead brought Ryoga from his reverie and he looked around, trying to track the source of the sounds. Surprisingly enough, even someone as directionally challenged as Ryoga managed to spot the woman that was being accosted.

>Not more than a hundred meters ahead of him, a gorgeous woman in what seemed to be an evening dress was floating in the air. That in itself would have been enough to make him investigate, but the sight of the woman frantically trying to defend herself with a black basketball against a hideous, slavering demon made his blood boil and rational thought depart.

>Ryoga closed the range to just a little over fifteen meters, sprinting down the street and making sure that he kept them both in clear sight. For a short moment, Ryoga's confidence in right and wrong was momentarily shaken when he saw the beautiful woman with the long, pink hair firing black bolts of energy at the demon. Could she be one of the witches that Nabiki told them controlled the demons? If she was, why was the demon attacking her?

>That answer was easy enough to see when a second woman came into view. Although she was shorter than the first, she was no less striking of appearance. Unfortunately, where the floating woman in the evening dress seemed to embody the word beautiful, the woman on the ground had to rely on her clothing to capture attention. With flame red hair - longer than Ranma's and flowing freely - and a small red dress of almost matching colour, this woman was the obvious controller of the demon, as she kept shouting orders to it.

>Ryoga did not have to watch for too long to see that it was a slightly less than even fight. Both of the women were throwing energy blasts at each other that were digging up the road and knocking serious chunks out buildings, but only the witch had a demon. The other woman - the poor, beautiful damsel in distress - was being forced back. Ryoga grinned, bearing one nasty looking fang as he brought his hands together in front of him. No-one had noticed him yet, and he was sure that he could help even things up just a little, even without that useless Ranma.

>"SHI SHI HOKODAN!"

>The glowing green sphere of depression and anger slammed straight into the side of the demon, knocking it over when it was caught unawares. The creature might not be able to fly, but it certainly had been throwing something at the woman in the air, and Ryoga had just managed to remove that additional distraction for her. Already his plan was working: go in, keep hitting things, and eventually you will win.

>When the Witch turned and took in the second target, both Ryoga and the woman he was rescuing took the opportunity to try and melt her into the pavement. The pale woman in the short dress was too wily and quick to be taken in by that, and she leapt into the air, easily avoiding both strikes.

>Things got messy from there on. The demon quickly regained its feet, and showed that it had really only taken fairly minor damage from the blast. Everyone else in the battle seemed quite content to stay at range, but Ryoga knew that he would need to close quickly. The Ki blasts that he was throwing around were too draining. He did not yet have the practice to be able to keep them up for long, and if he needed to be able to fight, he could not afford to exhaust himself with them yet.

>Ryoga was just preparing to charge the demon and see how it liked a close range Bakusai Tenketsu when one of his Ki attacks missed. While missing was not exactly uncommon, he had never seen this sort of effect before, and apparently neither had anyone else. The pretty little statue that his floating friend had been guarding happened to be in the path of his green blast. Rather than being smashed into millions of shards like he expected the crystal to do, it grew. A single hit from the Shi Shi Hokodan somehow made the elegant crystal

statue of a woman grow by over two feet. Where before it had been almost six feet tall, now it just topped eight.

>Whatever marvel of artistry the floating woman in formal wear had created, the Witch was an art critic of legendary proportions. Infuriated by the growth of the crystal, the Witch redoubled her attacks, forcing the defender back and away from the statue she protected. With this opening, rather than have the demon charge Ryoga, the Witch ordered it to destroy the crystal statue.

>Before Ryoga could get within arm's reach to stop it, there was a terrible shattering noise, and both the demon and the statue exploded. Small crystal shards stung his skin, but Ryoga shrugged them off, inured to the unpleasantness of exploding rocks long ago.

>Once again, Ryoga found himself grinning in battle. The woman he was rescuing did not appreciate the fact that her statue had been destroyed, but that could not detract from the fact that they now outnumbered the Witch two to one. Gathering energy so he could send a blast forward, forcing the Witch to dodge while he tried again to get in hitting distance, Ryoga watched as the Witch beamed a sinister smile at his ally, completely ignoring him.

>"While we work to fulfilling our Mistress' goals, I do not think that she would appreciate having an enemy as strong as you to be allowed to gain a foothold. Be warned! The Death Busters shall stop you wherever you try to gain power!"

>Insulted by the fact that someone would ignore him in favour of the person he was rescuing - even if she had done vastly more property damage than he had managed in the same time - Ryoga unleashed his Ki. Yet again his foe avoid it; this time she simply vanished into thin air, leaving him alone on the deserted street with only a flying, pink haired stranger for company.

>Looking around, Ryoga tried to find sight of another enemy, but came up empty. Empty, that was, until a perfectly formed face suddenly dropped into view right in front of him.

>Ryoga stuttered for a moment, grasping vainly for coherent thought as he took in the beauty before him. Her soft pink hair was done up in two pony tails, starting in short bundles on either side of her head. She had fine, delicate eyebrows, a perfectly formed, petite mouth, and a pair of the largest, most expressive red eyes that he had seen on anyone short of Akane. Not that Akane's eyes were red, but they were big and...

>Ryoga realised that he was beginning to babble out loud and closed his mouth with a snap. He felt his cheeks begin to redden as they always did under the scrutiny of a pretty woman. Nervously, he brought his fingers together and began to twiddle the nervously in front of him. Suddenly, the pert little mouth opened in a happy laugh; glorious, but not quite mocking in the way of Kodachi, and possibly tainted by sadness in its core.

>"Oh, Little Man, you are so modest! Imagine one such as you coming to save myself, Black Lady!"

>Wrenching his eyes away from her captivating face, Ryoga tried to find something else to look at that would allow him to think well enough to be able to speak. For a moment, his eyes tracked down her long neck, and across the top of her chest and shoulders. She stood almost as tall as he did, and the way that the fine, translucent red fabric revealed just a touch of cleavage threatened to send him unconscious before he looked away. After a embarrassing period of staring, he was able to concentrate on the shattered remains of her statue as they quickly vaporised into the early evening air.

>"I... I'm Hibiki Ryoga... Are... Are you all right? Did they hurt you?"

>"I'm am quite unharmed, I assure you. It would most assuredly take an effort on her behalf to harm one such as myself, but your concern is quite touching I assure you, Hibiki-san."

>"R-Ryoga, please."

>She favoured him another smile, and his blood pressure went up another ten points. "Ryoga-san, then. It is most unusual to find a knight upon Tokyo's streets. Most everyone seems to only care for themselves. I... I did not expect that anyone would do such a thing for me..."

>"Oh! I would have done it for anyone!"

>"Oh..." Black Lady's smile slipped slightly, but she was still happy as she turned away from him and gestured peremptorily in the air. Immediately, the strange, black, floating basketball scooted over and hovered next to her. At this distance, he could see that it had a pair of large eyes painted on it, and a set of silly looking cat ears on top. "Come, Luna-P. We must return to Wiseman."

>As she lifted into the air again and floated off, Ryoga wondered if he would ever see her again. True, her laugh echoed across the buildings in a disturbing manner, but she was polite to him, which is more than he could say about most people. He hoped that she would not be attacked any more this evening, because he was sure that he would not be able to find her again of his own volition.

>Setting off, Ryoga left the ravaged section of street behind him. If he stayed where he was, there was no chance of finding Ranma. His only hope was to keep walking until he ran into the boy again. Ohhh, the trials of working with Saotome! Casting a glance skywards in the direction Black Lady had flown, Ryoga mused quietly to himself.

>"I wonder why she had that black tattoo on her forehead?..."

>* * *

>Tomoe Hotaru lay on her bed and took a look at her door before settling back down. Her door was closed, but she was still nervous about what she was going to do. What if someone came in and saw it? Worse still, what if they recognised it? Then again, what if they did not recognise it? Would she be doomed to a life of wondering what her new knowledge meant and how she got it?

>It had been a whole week since the Incident - she even capitalised it in her head - and she had not managed to gather up the courage to do what she knew she could. A week ago she had collapsed, fainting in the middle of the street. No-one really noticed it except her, after all she was the sickly little Tomoe girl, she was always fainting. That's what everyone in her class said. Even she would not have been too concerned about it, if it was not for the fact that she had just been blessed by a goddess or something at the same time.

>Hotaru did not read many Shoujo manga, but Hotaru knew enough to understand what had happened. Somehow, out of all the girls in Tokyo, she had been chosen to be a magical girl defender. Only... couldn't they have chosen someone else? She was not sufficiently silly as to lie to herself about her physical abilities. Hotaru knew that if her new role as a magical girl entailed anything more strenuous than walking along, she would shortly collapse.

>Maybe... Maybe the goddess or the aliens or whoever gave her the powers did so because she was good and pure and nice. Again, while she could honestly say that she was a nice person, Hotaru was sure that there were others out there that would be much better, much nicer than her. Like Minaguchi Yuko in 3-D. She was always organising

cake days and things like that for charities. Why wasn't she chosen to be a magical girl?

>"Mouu..." She quietly lamented. The only reason that she could come up with for her to be picked was her special 'healing hands'. If she really tired, she could help people get better. It took all her effort and usually it was enough to make her collapse, but if she tried, she could heal cuts or scrapes. But if that was why she had been chosen, surely she would have been told about it. All she knew about were her powers, and none of them included healing. The closest she seemed to get to that was the Silence Wall, and all that was good for was protecting things, it did not do a single thing to make them get better.

>Mind you, the Silence Wall was much better than her other abilities. The Silence Glaive Surprise, she just might see herself being able to use, she knew that with practice she could easily reduce the destruction to a hundred meters, maybe even less. Unfortunately, at the moment she lacked that practice, and destroying a dozen city blocks did not strike her as the way for a good and proper magical girl to behave. But seriously, what was the possible use of the Death Reborn Revolution? An attack that could destroy the entire planet!? Why on Earth would she ever use that? Hotaru could not even begin to think of a situation that you would even need a tenth of that power.

>To make things worse, she did not even have a name! What sort of Goddess knocks you out on the street, gives you all these powers and does not even give you a name? How was she supposed to be a real magical girl without some really cool name like Moldiver? She guessed she could call herself Pretty Hotaru the Magical Girl, but it was a bit long winded. Besides, she did not have a talking pet cabbit like Pretty Sammy did in the anime.

>Until this evening, she did not even know what she was supposed to do with her powers. But earlier, before she went to her bedroom to rest, she had seen her father watching the television. His rapt attention was captured by the brief segment of amateur video that showed some other, bigger girls attacking a woman with their magic. That was when she realised that she had a mission. She knew why she had her powers: she was supposed to stop the fighting! She was supposed to be the one to protect the innocent, to uphold the law, and serve the people.

>Hotaru just wished she really was certain, and not just trying to convince herself with her own words. If she was wrong... then she might end up hurting someone, and she did not want to do that. Hotaru had been hurt enough at school to know how little she enjoyed it, and the thought of inflicting pain on someone did not sit well with her. But then, if the only way to save the city from the warring magical girls was to show that that she was top cookie, that was what she would have to do.

>Hotaru pushed aside the thought of just how she would get them to stop. The first time she tried to fight them, they would either kill her, or she would level a dozen city blocks. That is no way to try and talk reason to someone.

>A final check to see that her door was still closed and that she was alone, and Hotaru was ready. She could not say why she thought she had suddenly become a magical girl. She was just so sure that it was the truth. Not being able to summon a Henshin stick would be like finding out that she did not really have lungs and a mouth, and could not breathe.

>Thought became action, and Hotaru lifted her palm, revealing a shiny, dark blue stick. Her Henshin stick was not much larger than a novelty pen, and it was fat just like them too. She might have

preferred a Hello Kitty figurine on end, but she knew that the Fluorite stone embossed with the bright blue emblem was what should have been there.

>Studying the stylised symbol, Hotaru tried to remember her English lessons but she could not quite recognise it. It looked like a cross between a 't' and a 'h', with the crossbar appearing in the top of the 'h''s main upright. When she could not remember the letter, she even checked her text book, but going through the alphabet there did not yield any better results. Perhaps it was something in an alien language, and she had been chosen by them to make the Earth safe for them to visit.

>Hotaru wished once more that she knew why she had these powers. At least now that she had summoned an unquestionably solid object from thin air, she knew that she was not going crazy. In the back of her mind there had been this little voice suggestion that her new memories were just a hallucination, but now she knew better, and there was only one step left to take...

>"Saturn Eternal Power! Make Up!"

>She knew that she had several forms she could transform into, each one more powerful than the last, but if she was going out to fight bad guys, by golly, she would take all the help she would get!

>Placing one hand in the air, Hotaru rotated on the spot, feeling her clothes vanish, only to be replaced by new ones in a cascade of colours. Shaking her short hair out of her face, Hotaru placed her feet firmly on the floor and held her weapon in a comfortable parade rest sort of posture.

>It worked!

>Quietly crowing with delight, Hotaru crowded over to her mirror to check out her image. Oh! She looked so cute! She had to be the best looking magical girl that she had ever seen! She had smart looking, knee high boots that laced up. They had sensible, low heels on them too, perfect for running and fighting; not that she would be doing much of that, but it was the thought that counted. She was sure that her father would have said that the skirt was too short, but she liked it; it made her look more grown up. She must have looked at least thirteen, maybe even fourteen! She had two, big pretty bows, one on her chest, and one on her back, and the ribbons on that one went all the way to her knees!

>Giving a soft "Ohhh", Hotaru leaned in towards the mirror to get a better look at the gem sitting in the middle of her chest bow. It was big and clear, covered in bright, spiky angles, and really pretty. She had a gold tiara, and even little diamond shaped earrings. Best of all, she had a pair of wings!

>A short flutter, not enough to lift a small bird, and she was aloft, holding herself a foot above the ground, entranced by her image in the mirror. This was so cool! She had a magical girl outfit, a big weapon, magical powers and she could fly! What else could she ask for?

>A name! That was what she needed now. If she was going to go out there to right wrongs and triumph over evil, she needed a name that was as good as she looked. Touching down again and giving the mirror a smile with more confidence than she ever could have mustered before, Hotaru reflected on the problem for a moment. Well, there was Sailor V... but she had a mask, and did not look too much like Hotaru. Besides, Sailor H did not really give the right impression, especially with a skirt that short.

>Hmmm... Silence Glaive. Silence Wall. Saturn Power, and Saturn was the planet of Silence her memories told her. She would be...

>"Silence Girl! Bringing peace and justice to Tokyo!"

>Spinning around, Hotaru felt dizzy with happiness. All her life, things seemed to go badly. She was always sick, then there was that terrible explosion in her father laboratory that put her in hospital for so long. Even her mother... she could not remember her mother, she had died so long ago. But now there was this! Hotaru was a magical girl: Silence Girl, and she was going to be able to help people anywhere they needed it!

>Remembering how much she had hoped that her healing abilities would have been helped by her magical girl status, Silence Girl put away her weapon and smirked. A week ago, Tomoe Hotaru would have called that a physical impossibility. Silence Girl was a magical girl, and she could easily make an seven foot weapon simply disappear. Taking a moment, Silence Girl smiled and hugged herself, rocking backwards and forwards. All her manga said that magical girls had to hide their real identities, so she could not tell anyone she was Silence Girl, but she knew she was special. No matter what anyone else ever said from now on, she was special.

>Holding her hands out in front with her palms up, Silence Girl concentrated on her healing powers. In a few short moments, a dim white glow appeared over the palms of her elbow length gloves. She did it! She could feel the healing power there in her hands, and it was so easy! She could keep it up for minutes! She might even be able to heal something really big, like a broken leg, maybe even more! Ohhh, she felt so special! She could really help people now, she... She abruptly sat down on the bed, healing aura vanishing. She felt too tired to keep that up for long.

>"Well, never mind! I can still do all sorts of other cool stuff. What else can I do? I can... I can sense evil..."

>Then she did. She felt it. In her house. Below her floor, in the walls, the floor and the furniture. A seeping, malignant, warping evil growing from the basement. An evil she could feel centred on her father as he walked around in the kitchen preparing a late night snack.

>"Oh, Father..." Without fanfare, the magical girl uniform faded back into her normal clothes that she had been wearing and Tomoe Hotaru curled up into a little ball rocking back and forwards on the bed. She did not want to be a magical girl anymore. She wanted her father back. She did not want to see evil everywhere. She did not want to see her home and father turned into one of the bad guys.

>There had only ever been one person in her whole life that loved her. She could not remember her mother, and none of the other children at school liked her because she was weak and different. It was always her father. Her father was the one that talked to her, that loved her, that cared for her. He was the only truly good person she knew.

>Tears trickled down her cheeks but Hotaru did not try to wipe them away. What had seemed like such a great gift only moments ago was now a curse. Now she could see that something had happened to her father. He had seemed anxious and preoccupied recently, but she thought that it had been to something to do with the lab explosion. Now she could see that it was something more. Something had tainted him, taken away the good, loving man that was her father.

>For all her wonderful powers, there was nothing she could do to help him. He had been there for her whenever she was tired or weak, but now she could not be there for him. All her magic powers had let her do was see what was wrong. All she wanted was her father; even the ignorance she had minutes ago was better than this. She would have been happy until... Until whatever warped him came for her too, but

at least then, they would have still been together.

>Between quite sobs, Hotaru continually begged. "Take it back. Take them all back. I just want my father back. Please, take away the powers. I don't want them anymore..."

>* * *

>Finding one person in a city the size of Tokyo was almost an impossibility. With so many people, and such a large area, the possibility of a chance encounter had to be incredible. Simultaneously searching for another group of people at the same time did not really change the odds all that much.

>If one of the people you are trying to find is Hibiki Ryoga, then the odds of finding him actually in Tokyo become much worse. If he was the target of your quest, then you really should include all of Japan and China, and possibly a few other countries just to make sure.

>If, on the other hand, the renowned Hibiki-san is also searching for you, then the odds become truly astronomical. If this was the case, you really ought to give up and go home. Perhaps read a good book or twelve, or take up a new hobby - like making paper from the trees you grew yourself. There would be plenty of time. Because there is one certainty in this universe, and that is the fact that Hibiki Ryoga is almost never where he wants to be.

>The key word is almost never...

>When Ranma walked past a corner of a faded red brick building and a solid wall walked into her, she felt the odd stirring of destiny in the air. There would not be half a dozen people in the city that would be that solidly built, and she was sure than none of them would be able to walk into her with as little warning as this person had done.

>Slowly swivelling her head, Ranma turned and looked off to her right. Green leggings tied with rope? Right so far. Tracking up the body, she caught sight of Ryoga's confused expression and sighed in a mix of exasperation and relief. The dolt had not even notice the fact that he knocked her over!

>"Oi! Ryoga! Where'd you go?"

>Looking down at where Ranma was picking herself off the ground, Ryoga gave her a brief glare. "Ranma! We're supposed to working together! Why did you run off like that?"

>Standing toe-to-toe with the much bigger boy, the fiery redhead gave him a royal blasting. "I ran off? What sex did you think I was when we left the house? A boy! And who did you follow the first chance you got? Some six foot gaijin redhead! She didn't look a thing like me. So what are you complaining about me running off?"

>"What? You saw that? Well why didn't you say something?"

>"Why didn't I?... I was shouting at the top of my lungs, but you were too pig-headed to notice. Have you gone deaf or something? How many times did I have to say 'Ryoga, over here' before you noticed?"

>"So you just let me follow the wrong person? Ranma, I ought to..."

>"No you idiot! I managed to keep up with you until some kids splashed me with water. Next thing I know that gaijin's there, but you're missing. Did you finally wise up and figure out it wasn't me?"

>"Well, yeah, so I headed back to the Tendo Dojo and---"

>Ranma cut him off with a slicing motion of her hand. "I don't even wanna know where you ended up then. I..."

>"You what?"

>Ranma knew that the odds were too great on her finding Ryoga this afternoon. Luck alone could not have brought them together. It must

have been an act of the gods. Those same gods were obviously still looking over her shoulder, because they had just delivered retribution into Ranma's hands.

>With a finger that trembled with excitement, Ranma indicated what had captivated her attention down the street. Five girls, all in distinctive sailor suit costumes. The dreaded Sailor Senshi. Killers and worse, they were the architects of Ranma's pain, and she intended to extract the cost in the coinage of blood.

>Looking at the girls talking with such happiness and liveliness, Ranma had no difficulty at all in summoning a ball of green Ki into her hands. There they were, alive and well, and the only reminder of Akane was a grey tombstone and her pain. In nothing more than a whisper, Ranma offered a short prayer. "Akane, prepare to receive your first escorts into the afterlife."

>A quick glance showed that Ryoga was just as prepared as she was. Their enemy might have stopped to talk for a moment, but it looked like they wanted to leave any moment now. At only twenty meters from their prey, there was no way that they could miss. Surprise would be complete, and soon they would have their revenge. How tough could five little girls be?

>"Hit the tall one on three. I'll take the blondes, you take the brunettes."

>Without taking his eyes off the girls, Ranma felt Ryoga nod and counted quickly.

>"1... 2... 3! SHI SHI HOKODAN!"

>Twin balls of Ki flew out and knocked over the tall girl with the green skirt and pink bows like a target in a shooting gallery. Twin screams of rage instantly told the Senshi where their attacker were, but by then it was too late. Quite possibly Cologne and Happosai were the only people in Japan that were their equals in the Art, and if either of the elders had been there, neither would have lifted a finger against Ranma or Ryoga. In close combat, the Senshi's fighting skills paled to insignificance against Ranma and Ryoga.

>Years older and having both trained since before they could walk, either boy had hundreds of times the fighting experience than the entire Sailor team combined. They were fast and strong, capable of meeting any martial artist on their own terms and beating them. They were water and earth, elemental forces of vengeance, unstoppable by ordinary humans.

>However the Senshi were far from ordinary humans. They were a team, five bodies all part of the one whole. When they fought, it was not as individuals, but unified towards the greater good. They were strong because their hearts were pure, and they had were the inheritors of the greatest magical powers that the wisdom of the Silver Millennium had been able to create. Sailor Jupiter might have been felled by that first attack, but they were far from defeated.

>In this, the first conflict between them, both sides made the almost fatal mistake of underestimating their opponents. For Ranma and Ryoga, things seemed quite simple; they were the premier martial artists of their generation, and they had complete surprise. Having knocked down one enemy with their first attack, they were fully intending to bull their way through the remainder with equal ease. Despite the strong examples set by Ukyo and Shampoo, neither Ranma nor Ryoga could get past the fact that these were just girls; girls who did not even hold themselves like real martial artists.

>Mercury's computer had failed to alert the Senshi to any magical threat in the area, and as such, they were caught flat footed. So used to fighting the magically endowed Negaverse and Dark Moon

Family, the Senshi had forgotten the danger than mere humans could be. But then, the Senshi were all young girls and even Makoto, the most rambunctious of them, had never began to approach the level of someone who excelled in the art and dedicated their life to nothing else. Regardless of the fact that Senshi were caught by surprise, they reacted like the smoothly running team that they were.

>The martial artists held the high ground initially from surprise and unexpected effectiveness, but that soon faded as the Senshi showed them the effectiveness of magic. In no way was magic a substitute for the effort and training of martial arts: it was a completely separate path to a level of power that Ranma and Ryoga never even considered.

>All told, the battle could not have lasted more that thirty seconds.

>As soon as his Shi Shi Hokodan left his hands, Ryoga charged the two brunettes, feeling the blood sing in his veins as the familiar battle lust overtook him. He was dimly aware that Ranma was beside him, but that no longer mattered. All that mattered was the fight, the feeling of flesh under fist as he battered his way through his opponents. This was the way that it had been ever since he was young, and his battles with Ranma had only strengthened his rage. When Ryoga fought, there was only the battle; nothing else mattered. That was why Ranma had so often managed to trick him into a pool of water, but it was also the reason that he never stopped until his was crippled and unable to move. While Hibiki Ryoga still breathed, there was no defeat.

>One meaty fist knocked the one with the short hair flying. Reorienting onto the slightly taller brunette with the long flowing hair, Ryoga whipped up one leg and tried to separate her head from her shoulders. Amazement at the fact that she dodged did not even reach Ryoga's conscious mind. The idea that people could dodge his blows was firmly entrenched in his psyche from past battles. Avoidance would only get this girl so far before he managed to tag her, and no little girl would get up from a blow by someone as strong as him, surely.

>His enemy said something in the midst of reeling back from him, but Ryoga paid it no mind. Gnashing his teeth and snarling, Ryoga barrelled through for another attempt to pin the sailor in red. He missed her again, and ended up with his fist buried to the elbow in the wall behind her.

>"Stand still and let me kill you!"

>The girl finished her chat and took his brief pause as time to tag him on the forehead with a sheet of paper. Obvious she expected it to do something more than annoy him, because she stopped dodging for a moment to admire her handiwork.

>"Bad move, girlie!"

>Ryoga's straight right punch caught the brunette squarely in the forehead, jerking her chin backwards, and knocking her onto her bottom. That stunned Ryoga: the fact that this slight little girl had clearly survived such a strong punch was even now getting back to her feet. He was still grappling with the fact that a weak looking person like her could easily take what would have stunned Ranma when a pair of ferocious kicks landed into his side and sent him skidding across the ground slightly.

>Dusting himself off slightly, Ryoga gave the other girl a smile. 'Well', he thought. 'They're all tough customers. Not strong enough to hurt an Hibiki, though.' The short haired brunette who had kicked him was still holding her leg in the air, seemingly stunned by the fact that she had failed to either cave in his ribs, or to even get

his attention with her powerful blows.

>Now that they knew him for the threat that he was, none of the girls were too keen on letting him touch them again. After several charges against one or the other, Ryoga suddenly noticed his feet getting heavy. A quick glance down showed him that his feet were encased in ice; ice that was growing at the end of a long spurt coming from the hands of one of his opponents.

>"Ice? You'll have to do better than that to keep me here!"

>To demonstrate just how futile her efforts were, Ryoga' bent down and slammed his fist into the clear ice at his feet. While more ice began to form over his shoulder and arm, Ryoga stared in amazement. He cracked it! That was all. Before, he had demolished an entire ice rink with a single blow that was weaker than this one. How could ice possibly be so strong?

>His brief indecision was enough to seal his fate, as the sailor's cocoon of ice continued to enshroud him, forming a complete shell. This magical ice, whatever it was, was so hard that no matter how he strained, Ryoga could not form the leverage to break it. Even the breaking point seemed to be able to do no more than shatter a little bit surrounding his finger. It was a start, but at that rate, their enemies would finish them off well before he escaped. Growling through the ice, Ryoga's eyes sought Ranma and prayed that Ranma would make these girls pay dearly for his and Akane's lives.

>Ranma's fight had started similarly to Ryoga's. However, no matter how contorted with rage she was, Ranma could not loose herself in the battle like her now-ally Ryoga. She was not laughing and joking like she normally did in a fight, but she managed to keep a small part of herself detached, observing everything that was happening and absorbing it for future review. It was the key to Ranma's staggering ability to learn new moves. She never saw something just once, for after a battle she would replay an enemy's moves back to herself again and again until she could see it in her sleep.

>Her two enemies were a fine pair for a martial artist of her calibre to fight. Both young girls, they could not have been more than fifteen, and neither of them looked like they had ever really fought a single day in their lives. There was one girl with enough blonde hair to give Shampoo a run for her money, and another with the strangest hair style Ranma had ever seen. Basing her decision on the repulsive aesthetics of the hairstyle, Ranma ran straight past the girl with the red bow in her hair and delivered a snap kick to her friend's chin.

>'Glass jaw', Ranma idly noted as the girl flew up and backwards. She was obviously unconscious from the way her arms limply flowed around. No-one could possibly move like that when they were conscious; at least, no-one Ranma had ever heard of. Turning her attention back to the girl in the orange skirt, Ranma lashed out with a kick to the back of the girl's knees than took her to the ground.

>Faster than Ryoga and blessed by the fact that she was really only fighting one opponent, Ranma quickly established the advantage over her opponent. She was fast enough to dodge out of Ranma's Amaguriken after only half the blows had landed, but even then she did not have Ryoga's constitution; or possibly she was reeling in amazement. Certainly, it did not make a great deal of sense to Ranma that the girl backed off slightly and tried to blow her a kiss.

>Grimacing at the thought that this was another one of the crazy girls that seemed to plague her life, Ranma came in low and fast, hoisting her for a hip throw the moment that she winked and began to draw her hand away from her mouth. With an amazed look on her face,

the girl in the orange skirt sailed across half the street and slammed face first into the ground in a very inelegant landing.

>Taking advantage of her brief victory, Ranma accounted for the others on the battlefield. Ryoga was keeping two girls on the ropes, the girl with the silly hair was standing shakily and wailing. Most amazingly, the girl that both she and Ryoga had hit with the Shi Shi Hokodans at the start was trying to get back to her feet. What did it take to keep these people down for the count?

>Even the scant moments required to take in that little information almost proved to be too much. Only a deeply ingrained sense of danger and the rapidly spoken "Venus Crescent Beam!" allowed Ranma to dodge a bright beam of yellow coming from the fingertip of her enemy. Cursing herself for a fool, Ranma charged back at the girl, crossing the short meters between them before she finished firing. 'Of course they had beam attacks, you idiot', she thought. 'That's what killed Akane...'.

>Now a red haze covered Ranma's eyes and the rest of the world vanished. For a while, it had been like any other fight but that single thought of Akane had driven reason before it. All that mattered was breaking this human shaped thing in front of him. Shattering it into a million pieces, making it hurt a thousand times over for every second of life that they had deprived Akane.

>When Ranma popped herself upright in front of the girl, she still had her arm out, looking shocked at the fact that she missed her target. Capturing the sailor's extended right arm under her left, Ranma held it close to her body. Turning her body to force the arm painfully in its shoulder joint, Ranma brought her left leg up outside her arm and dropped it cracking down on top of her victim's head.

>Not satisfied with the way that the sailor started to go limp in her hands from the blow, Ranma tried it a couple more times, alternating with kicks to her face on the return. Despite the pain and the debilitating position she held the other girl in, Ranma could feel her enemy begin to struggle again. Perhaps she had realised that Ranma intended to beat her to death like this, and going limp would just make it easier for her.

>Before she could escape, Ranma used one of many moves she would never have tried against Ryoga or any of her normal opponents. Supporting herself on her right leg, Ranma dropped her full weight onto her left leg as it was crossed over the other girl's arm. Held between the girl's shoulder and Ranma's grip, it was the joints in the captive arm that gave way under the attack, simultaneously dislocating both shoulder and elbow. That was the reason Ranma would never have done it to her old opponents: no matter how good modern surgery was, no-one would ever fully recover from that move.

>Ranma's prey gave a satisfying - if high pitched - scream as it fell to the ground, clutching its ruined right arm. Grabbing a handful of thick blonde hair, Ranma yanked her back to her knees and bent down behind her. Shifting her grip slightly, Ranma placed one hand across her jaw, and put the heel of her other hand against the agonised girl's forehead. This was another move she had never even considered needing before. No-one recovers from a broken neck, and until Akane's death, Ranma would have been happy living her entire life without killing anyone.

>"This is for killing Akane. You and you're friends will never kill anyone again!"

>The thought of killing this first time made Ranma pause for just the

slightest moment. A single instant where her whole life of being friendly and forgiving rebelled against this final, irrevocable act. That instant was enough. Enough so that someone unseen in her rage managed to draw themselves together and put together a credible attack.

>The words "Supreme Thunder" did not impact on Ranma's consciousness. Her whole world was centred around the one frail neck she held in her grasp and the life that now hung in the balance. The words might not have registered but the electricity associated with them certainly did.

>Acting like she had just grabbed a live power cable - which was not far from the truth - Ranma's back arched and her muscles tensed, throwing her half a dozen meters down the street. Blue electricity danced along her for long moments, making her convulse like an epileptic watching a dozen strobe light arrays. Finally the pain stopped and self preservation made Ranma roll to one side as soon as she was capable of controlling her limbs.

>Smoke drifted off her body in a few places, testament to the electrocution she had just received, but Ranma knew that the pain of sudden movement was a small price to pay. As if on cue, a glowing yellow disc carved a small chunk of the street out then returned to the girl that had thrown it. Rising to one knee, Ranma twitched slightly as her muscles tried to shake off the effect of the lightning attack. A look around the near deserted street revealed that things had not gone as well as they had expected.

>Astonishingly, the girl in the green skirt was standing. She did not look happy, but she was far from being the blasted corpse that Ranma expected the Shi Shi Hokodan to cause. Ranma's first victim was on her feet, giving a scowl that would have made Akane proud. Worse still, both of the dark haired girls were looking at her with blood in their eyes. They did not look unhurt, but the Ryoga Popsicle behind them testified to who had won that fight.

>Ryoga down, she was hurt, and all they had to show for it was a crippled girl and an 'almost'. Gritting her teeth, Ranma stood and faced off against her enemies. She knew their reputation. They would kill her in cold blood the first chance they got. Heaven forbid what would happen to Ryoga if she ran off. There was only one choice, and Ranma did not like to make it: in her injured state, Ranma needed to get through their line, rescue Ryoga and escape. She smirked when she realised just how impossible it sounded.

>That smirk irritated the bad guys no end, and aside from the orange skirted cripple, they all attacked. No longer in the hyper-sensitive state she had started the battle in, Ranma could no longer closely follow the intricate moves that each of them made before they blasted out their energies at her. That did not mean that she was incapable of dodging, and the time required to create the attack let Ranma dash off to one side, heading past the red skirted girl who had just tried to roast her.

>Her zig turned into a zag when the second round of fire came in. Diving full length, Ranma just sailed under the multicoloured pyrotechnics that were aimed at her. Touching the ground almost right between the brunettes, Ranma tucked into a curl and rolled up onto her feet, conserving her forward momentum so that she could lift the big icicle containing Ryoga off the ground.

>Taking advantage of the fact that Ryoga's icy prison had almost stopped her, Ranma grunted and threw herself up and back. This time she went overhead as the girls tried to fry her. Ranma hit the ground running and swung into the first alley that she could find. The turmoil of the rapidly moving girl must have confused her enemies,

because the first footfalls of pursuit silenced almost immediately. Ranma was tempted to stash Ryoga and try to get back into the battle, but she heard the silly looking blonde calling out another attack.

>Fearing that the sailor planned to blast through the corner of the building hiding her, Ranma took off down the street, her fingers slowly melting the ice holding her only ally. She had seen the powers of a Venus Crescent Beam and a Moon Tiara Action, she had no interest in finding out what a Moon Healing Activation would do to her. Especially since the scream behind her made it sound like one sailor was putting the other out of her misery. What cold hearted team would turn their attacks on another member?

>They might not have won this battle, but they did not really lose it easier. A hot bath would melt Ryoga out, and Ranma had seriously wounded one of Akane's killers. It was a start, and next time, Ranma and Ryoga would be able to do even better.

>The sight of a female Ranma carrying Ryoga encased in a block of ice should have been one to raise eyebrows and elicit comments of concern. In most homes it would have been sufficient reason to call the hospital, sending the whole family into a panic. In the Tendo home it was greeted by a quiet "Hello Ranma-kun. The furo is available if you want it."

>Having lived with the strangeness associated with the extraordinary martial artists for months now, Kasumi was quite willing to take a few things in stride. She was as well aware as anyone else that encasing Ryoga in a block of ice for ten minutes would do nothing more than make the boy mad. As for their allegedly male guest coming home as a girl... that was par for the course around here.

>"Thanks Kasumi. Could you call Pop and Nabiki? We'll be ready in ten minutes."

>"Certainly, Ranma-kun. Have a nice bath."

>Ranma nodded and continued up the stairs to eventually drop Ryoga - icy covering and all - straight into the hot bath. Water splashed everywhere, including over the now male Ranma, but the bathroom stayed drier than it often did when the two boys met there. So often in the past, the bathroom had been the scene of battles but today Ranma simply sat patiently, occasionally draining off the cold water and replacing it with new hot water.

>When Ryoga's head was finally clear he looked at Ranma and opened his mouth to say something but nothing came out. What could he say? The man he had hated more than anything in this world had saved him from death today and had just sat by him, ensuring that he safely recovered.

>Ryoga tried to say something else, only hesitating when Ranma stood up. "I know what you mean, Ryoga. Ain't no need to say it. You would have done the same thing for me."

>As much as Ryoga hated to admit it, Ranma was right. Ryoga would have done the same thing for him had their situations been reversed. Even before Akane had died, Ryoga was aware that he would have fought beside Ranma if he needed to. Now, there was no question of need. They were united against a common enemy.

>Shaking the last of the ice from his legs, Ryoga stepped out of the bath and dried himself off while Ranma waited in the changing room. They had not discussed it, but they both knew that the whole family would want to know how they had fared on their first night of protecting Tokyo. At the very least, Nabiki would surely pump them dry of every detail they could remember. Anything they told her now would surely come back to help them next time as her analytical mind put the puzzle pieces together and found out all the secrets of their

enemies.

>With a slight swish, the changing room door opened and they walked down to the living room where Kasumi, Nabiki, Soun and Genma all awaited them. The mood was heavy and tense, as it would be considering the fact that the boys had initially expected to be out for several more hours, and no-one had even considered having Ryoga come home in an ice-cube.

>Nabiki gestured to a couple of spare spaces around the table and the weary warriors sat. "I think we can assume that something happened. Do you want to tell it to me from the start?"

>Both boys began talking at the same time, but Ranma overrode Ryoga and forced his version to be the one they listened to. "Well, after we left here, Pig Boy, sorry, Ryoga got lost. I figured on taking a look around the city for a while by myself. After a bit I spotted Ryoga, then them sailors. Well, few fought them, but they got Ryoga and I almost nailed one of them. She'll be out of it for a while. I think that's about everything."

>Nabiki smacked her head with her palm and moaned. That was supposed to be a detailed report? She was about to launch into Ranma when Ryoga pushed him aside and took centre stage. Not only was he a better storyteller than Ranma, he also possessed vital information that Ranma was not acquainted with.

>After telling everyone about Black Lady and Ryoga's own - slightly more verbose - description of the fight, it was Nabiki and Genma's turn to try to make sense out of what they heard. With a polite nod of her head to let Genma proceed, Nabiki continued to touch type notes as they spoke.

>Here was the point where Genma's years of experience showed over Ranma's youth and talent. They had already established that Genma was not capable of matching Ranma in a fight, but he had the wisdom of years on the road under Happosai.

>Step-by-step, Genma led them through the fight. Under his patient coaxing, the two boys revealed every move that they made, and every attack that their enemies had done. Once he had constructed a timeline of the events from a martial perspective, he handed it back to Nabiki. Grinning like a shark, Nabiki went to work on her houseguests like they were defendants at a murder trial.

>Every detail, she questioned. How long was it between fighting Black Lady and fighting the Senshi? How long did each fight last? What was each person wearing? What sort of magic did they use? How much damage did things do? Who gave orders and who followed them? Anything and everything was prized out by her intense questioning and stored into her laptop.

>Nabiki's arm might have been broken, but that was no reason that she could not operate a computer. She had never needed one before to keep up with things as simple as running a gambling ring in the school, but for something as important and complex as this, she wanted every benefit she could get. For that reason she had spent a fair portion of the money she had accumulated and acquired the computer. She was already making a map with all of the known sightings of demons and Senshi, and eventually she hoped to be able to predict their movements.

>Finally, hours later, Nabiki was finished. Kasumi had managed to serve dinner some time during the questioning, and everyone was feeling very tired. The sheer emotional impact of their first battle - a success by almost any standard - was draining. Bidding everyone good night, Nabiki wandered off to bed. At the entrance to the room, Nabiki halted and looked back at the assembled people.

>"Each one of these girls is as fast as Ranma, and as tough as Ryoga,

maybe not quite as strong." She held her hands up to block the protests of egotistical martial artists. "Guys, that's based on what you, yourselves, told me. Is there any way that we can beat them?"

>Ranma, Ryoga and Genma all nodded as one and spoke in one voice. "Training."

>"Training? You're telling me you can train so that you can beat five girls, any one of which might be able to win against you?"

>Again they nodded, but this time it was only Genma who spoke. "They need magic to be that good. Us... These boys... They only need themselves. We'll work and we'll train, and some day they will be good enough to beat one of the Sailor Senshi any day of the week."

>Slightly abashed, Nabiki nodded then turned and left the room. Ranma and Ryoga were about to follow her when Genma placed a hand on his son's arm.

>"Boy, I want to speak to you for a minute. You can't go to bed yet."

>"All right, but make it fast." Ranma's normally low tolerance for his father was rapidly diminishing as exhaustion crept through his body.

>Genma nodded and gestured Ryoga to follow them up the stairs. After leaving Ryoga in the guestroom that he would share with the Saotomes, Genma took Ranma down the hall slightly more and pushed open the door to Akane's room. He did not turn on the light switch, instead looking at his son in the shadowed darkness of the room.

>"What are we doin' here old man? You know I don't like comin' in here. It reminds me of..."

>Genma nodded, streetlight reflecting off his glasses. "I brought you here so that you could think about Akane when I talk to you. So that you can remember her. Remember why you are doing this."

>He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts then went on. "You fought tonight, Boy. Fought well too. You make your father proud. Did you enjoy it, Boy? Did you enjoy fighting for real, not just training all the time? Did you like it when you put those moves into real use?"

>"I... Yes, It felt good. I enjoyed it. I know I shouldn't but I did. No! I was doing what was right, that was why I enjoyed it! There's nothing wrong with tryin' to defend people."

>Genma nodded, a veritable sage. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone. He spoke enticingly, encouragingly as though he was trying to get Ranma to join him in the way that he felt. "How about when you had that blonde girl in your grip? I heard what you said, you just kept hitting her. Didn't it feel good, to feel the way that she hurt, for hurting you and Akane? How about when you had her by the neck? Feels nice, doesn't it? You can feel her life in your hands. Every breath that she takes, it's a gift from you. Makes you feel like a real man doesn't it? Being able to kill someone, it makes you feel... stronger... better..."

>"I... That is... When she... But I..."

>Turning his head in apparent disgust, Genma studied the side of the room while he covertly watched his son. Subtly trying to lead him into apostasy, all the while hoping that his son understood what the art really was about. "But what? But you waited? But you couldn't do it? But you don't want to kill? Not even the girl that killed Akane? What kind of a man are you?"

>"HEY! I am a man! I just... It took me a while. I was going to... I just couldn't do it straight away."

>Nodding once, Genma flicked on the light and walked up close to his

son. "That is what I wanted to hear. If you enjoyed it... If you felt no concern at killing someone... Then I would have failed and you would be no man at all.
"I've done many bad things in my life, many you are aware of, and many more you will hopefully never know. But I have never killed anyone. I came close on several occasions. Times when killing seemed the only way out. I will never condemn you if you kill these girls. They are murders, cold-blooded killers who are beyond the reach of the law.

>"There is no point in trying to stop these women if you just turn yourself into a heartless killer like they are. Always remember that Ranma. Are you doing what is right?"

>His eyebrows lowered and his fists clenched. "I am, Pop. I know what I'm doing is right, and I'm the one that's gotta do it."

>Taking his son by the shoulders, he turned him gently to face the mirror over Akane's dresser. "Don't tell me, Boy. Tell him, that man you're looking at. You can lie to other people, but never, ever lie to yourself. I'm going to leave now, Boy, but you stay here for a bit. Just stay and ask yourself: Are you doing what is right? Is this what Akane would have wanted you to do?"

>Ranma started to answer, but Genma walked away. "You can tell me what you want. But you've got to be able to look in that mirror, and tell him to truth. You've to be able to look yourself in the eye and be proud of who you are. Somedays, I can't. Somedays, I look at the boy I raised, and I can stare at the mirror and say I did a good job. "Don't lie to yourself boy. Take a lesson from you father. It never helps anything."

>With that, Genma closed the door and left Ranma alone, staring at his own reflection. His reflection blinked back some tears, and Ranma ran a hand across his face. "I miss you, Akane... Uncute tomboy..."

>Steeling himself, Ranma gripped the edge of the dresser and caught his eyes in the mirror. "I know Akane would want me to help other people, to keep them safe. I know getting rid of those girls is the only way I can do it... So that's what I've got to do. And that's someone I can be, someone who has to kill murderers to save everyone else."

>When he walked out the door, Ranma slowly closed it behind him with nothing more than a quiet click. Somehow, outside the room, things seemed a little less close, a little less intense. Placing two fingers on the duck nameplate, Ranma whispered in the silence of the hall. "Thanks, Akane. I... I'll see you again tomorrow."

>* * *

>Outside it was a lovely morning to walk to school. The sun was shining and it was pleasantly warm. There was not a cloud in the sky, and it was one of those rare Tokyo days where the wind has come in just right overnight, cleaning the sky of pollution.

>_Outside_ the Tomoe home it was a lovely day...

>Inside the house was another matter. Everything looked nice, a perfect example of a single parent home in a reasonably well-off area. The house was clean, the people smiled and the food was good. What more could anyone ask for?

>Tomoe Hotaru knew the answer to that question. She had tried her powers again this morning, desperately hoping that the feelings of evil she had sensed before were merely the product of her tiredness. Regrettably, that was not the case. Her home was like a thin watercolour painted over an unseen canvas of evil. The first time that you scratched at the paint, the truth was revealed. She could not see it now, her eyes were as blind as everyone else's to the

hidden truth, but that did not change the truth.

>The truth was that her father had somehow, sometime been taken over by the forces of darkness. Casting silent eyes across the breakfast table, Hotaru thought it must have had something to do with her father's "lab assistant" called Kaolinite. Hotaru was old enough to realise that her father might not want to stay single forever, but she could have found almost anyone that would have been better for him than this woman. Her skin was pale and dead looking, and she dressed like a... Well, Hotaru was brought up not to say those sorts of things.

>What was worse was that when Hotaru had used her magic to examine the woman this morning, she had seen a different sort of evil within Kaolinite. Her father's was an evil that had grown inside him and taken over, she could still see the good within in him; at least, she thought - she hoped - that she could still see it. Kaolinite was like a plant that had been nourished from birth. She was evil through and through, and Hotaru had a horrible feeling that she must be one of the reasons that Hotaru had received her magical girl powers. She was someone that Hotaru might one day have to face to save Tokyo.

>Neither her father nor Kaolinite commented when Hotaru failed to finish her breakfast. While it might have been the fact that the sickly girl often was incapable of finishing a whole meal, Hotaru believed it was their new preoccupation. Ever since Kaolinite had moved in with them and her father had redoubled his efforts in their basement laboratory, he had been distant. Hotaru's father no longer seemed to care for her in the way that he once did. Hotaru could only hope that when she saved him from the evil that was claiming his soul, then perhaps he would come back to her.

>After brushing her teeth and checking the last of her uniform, Hotaru nervously hopped from foot to foot. She wanted her father to come upstairs again and take her off to school, however it seemed that today he would be staying in his lab the whole time. It used to be that he would usher her off to the school every day, often walking with her. Since he worked at her school, it made sense, though these days he avoided his work more than he attended it.

>"Please, Daddy. Come up from your laboratory today..." It was more of a prayer than a request and it went unheard by gods and men alike.

>When the time for her to depart for school came and went, Hotaru stood in the hallway, nervously shuffling from foot to foot. She did not want to go down stairs to the basement. She had terrible memories of an explosion and pain, but if her father did not come up, it meant that she needed to go down. No matter how much she wanted to go off to school and ignore the terrible things that were happening in her home, Hotaru could not do it. The thought of her father being taken over by something evil hurt her heart like nothing else could. If there was the slightest chance that she could save him, she had to take it.

>Gathering up her courage, Hotaru looked around for Kaolinite and then tiptoed to the front door where her school shoes sat. She knew that it was not safe to walk around in the lab barefoot because of the danger of broken glass or spilled chemicals, so she carried her shoes to the staircase down and put them on. Swallowing despite her suddenly dry mouth, Hotaru pushed open the door and began her descent.

>The staircase was clean, painted and well lit, but something about it seemed to be as ominous as any of the scary movies that she had ever seen on television. With one hand on the railing, she walked down, her shoes softly clicking on the concrete, muted in the

distance by the growing sounds of bubbling and brewing.

>It was her first sight of the laboratory for quite a while, and somehow she was surprised by just how mundane it appeared. To Hotaru's uneducated eyes, her father's subterranean laboratory was almost identical to the science labs that they had at school. The one thing that was here that was not at school was her father, and that made all the difference.

>"Daddy..."

>When he turned his head and looked at her, the expression on his face could have been described as concerned and compassionate. Anyone other than Hotaru probably would have described it that way, but she knew this man too well. She could see the concern there, but there was no compassion, merely a hint of irritation.

>"What is it, Hotaru? Are you too ill to go to school?"

>"No. Daddy, I..."

>"What is it?" That trace of impatience was growing.

>Unable to stop herself, she ran over to him and hugged him around the waist, burying her head into the comforting warmth of his lab coat. "I want to help you, Daddy. I can feel it. Kaolinite... she's doing something to you... I can feel the evil in you, but it's not you..."

>Unseen by the small girl, every trace of compassion dropped from the elder Tomoe's face, and anger flashed across it. No matter what his face showed, Tomoe kept his voice calm and kind. "Shhh. There's nothing wrong with me, Hotaru-chan. You're just feeling confused, I'm sure."

>"No! No, you have to believe me. I've seen it. There's something in you, something trying to take control."

>He forced a chuckle, then moved his daughter to sit on one of his stools. "Believe me, Hotaru, there is nothing wrong with me at all. I feel fine. Everything will be all right. How did you see this evil?"

>Hotaru ignored the alarm bells that began to ring in her head. "I... I got special powers last week... I can see all sorts of things... Where are you going, Daddy?"

>He was walking to the stairs, facing away from the girl while he spoke. "You're just excited, Hotaru-chan. I'll get Kaolinite. Together we will make you see that there is nothing to fear."

>"N-Nothing to fear?..."

>"Kaolinite! Get down here!" With that he turned and faced her again, his right eye glowing a strange, demented green. All pretence had gone from his expression. His smile was more of a leer or a gloating smirk than one of love, and he stood where he could bar her exit from the room. "We need you, Hotaru. You shall be the vessel that holds our mistress. When Kaolinite gets here, we shall make you understand. You will never want to leave again."

>Tears began to track down her pale face at those words. He couldn't be doing this! Not her father! Not to her! In a motion that was almost subconscious, Hotaru lifted her right hand to the ceiling and spoke the words; not as a war cry but more a cry of hope.

>"S-Saturn Eternal Power! M-Make Up!"

>Tomoe Souichi watched with a detached air as his daughter transformed into one of the Sailor Senshi. He was not sure that he could place the costume, but surely they were the only real magical girls around, and his daughter had just demonstrated unquestionable magical power. Idly he wondered if that was why he had been chosen, because of his daughter. He pushed that thought aside; it did not matter, only reclaiming the child mattered.

>"What are you going to do with that thing? Poke me? Or are you going to blast your poor, dear Daddy into little pieces?" Damn that Kaolinite! What was taking her so long?

>"Y-Your not my Daddy!"

>"No, I'm not, but he is in here. Deep inside me, and if you kill me, you'll kill him too. Can you do that little girl? Can you kill the daddy that loves you so much? Just give in. It's so much easier. We'll take away all your pain and worry. Soon you'll be happy again, and all this will seem like a bad dream."

>He took a step towards her, and she lowered the Silence Glaive to point at him with death and destruction hovering just beyond her tear-streaming eyes. "S-Stay away from me!"

>Another step. "You won't hurt me. You've already lost. I can hear Kaolinite now."

>Was that the door opening? Was Kaolinite about to come down the stairs? Hotaru was shaking so badly she almost dropped her weapon. When her father suddenly rushed towards her, she yanked up the pole arm and shouted instinctively. "No! Silence Glaive Surprise!"

>For an attack that powerful, it was almost anticlimactic. She had deliberately avoided him with her deadly power, but there was nothing that could protect the house above their heads. With a sickening slowness, the house began to fall apart in dreadful silence. It could not have taken more than five seconds, with the two of them watching stunned the whole time. Pieces began to lift out of the ceiling, the foundations, the walls; each dissolving away in a silence so complete it was almost painful.

>All too soon it was over, and Hotaru wiped some of the tears from her face with the back of her glove. She thought it would be hard to do what she had just done, but the power came easily and simply. It frightened her to think that she could level most of Tokyo with less effort than it took to walk across it.

>"You missed me, little girl, and that's the last mistake you'll ever make."

>With a voice that sounded as weak as she felt, Hotaru made one final wish that her father was all right and that someday she could come back and help him. "I didn't miss. I did it on purpose. I... I love you, Daddy."

>With that she gave one quick beat of her wings and floated out of the open-air basement. Seeing his target escaping, Tomoe lunged for her, missing her boots by a foot or more. Standing in the ruin of his once elegant home, Tomoe began bellowing insults and abuse at her as he stood underneath. She hovered only for a moment, then scooted off to the street. A single glance told him that it would be some time before he could climb out of the hole that he was in. The stairs to ground level were sheered cleanly three-quarters of the way to the top.

>Blocks from her house, Hotaru began to tire, causing her to land and transform back into her school uniform. She was shaking, badly, and it was not just due to the fatigue. If she had not sent most of the power straight up, who knows how many people she might have killed? Even now, she might have killed someone. Had Kaolinite really been at the stairs? Had she even been in the house at all?

>It was never like this in the Shojou manga that she read. The good girls never had to worry about this sort of thing. She could not even go to school, that would be the first place he would look. With her arms wrapped around her middle to fight off the cold that seemed centred in her heart, Hotaru walked down the street. Her big purple eyes were constantly welling tears, and her head was bowed. It was not fair. It just was not fair...

>* * *

>"Jupiter! Mars!" A single call from their leader brought them up short, and the two Senshi looked back at where their team mates were clustered in a tight huddle.

>Indecision wracked them for long moments. The red haired girl and her companion - who were obviously new Generals from the Negaverse - could not be far away. If the two of them gave pursuit now, they could catch them both. Then again, loyalty was not a highly recognised quality in the Negaverse, and the little female General was likely to ditch her companion just to gain the opportunity to circle back and attack Moon and Mercury while they were busy.

>The need to protect their friends and keep watch on the beaten Sailor Venus won, and the two Senshi quickly closed ranks. They stood with their backs to the small huddle in the middle of the street and steadfastly kept watch. Those two Generals might have managed to ambush them once, but they would not get the chance to again. Not with a pair of pretty soldiers on the lookout.

>As soon as she had finished trying to blast the red haired girl with her companions, Sailor Mercury had dived straight for Sailor Venus. Venus was in terrible shape - Mercury could not remember the last time that she had seen anyone so beaten - short of the time that she had visited her mother in the emergency ward of the hospital. Sailor Mercury's mother was a doctor, and when you added that to Mercury's native intelligence, limited medical knowledge and the superb scanning capabilities of the Mercury computer and visor, it resulted in Sailor Mercury being the default medic for the Sailor Senshi.

>Her intelligence did not give Sailor Mercury the years of experience that were really needed for treating these sorts of wounds, nor it give her the ability to close herself to the pain that her friend was feeling. Once - less than five minutes ago - Sailor Venus had been one of the most attractive girls that Mercury ever knew. Venus' normal name was Aino Minako; a bright, bubbly, blonde girl who defined the word cute. Unfortunately, her quest to become an idol signer may have been cut short by the way that horrible girl had pounded her nose flat. Mercury could think of only one reason why most of the bones in her face were not a shattered ruin, and it was the same magical reason that had kept Sailor Mars and herself going after those devastating hits of the man they had fought.

>Sailor Mercury had not even realised she was shaking and staring ineffectually at Venus' dislocated arm until she felt Sailor Moon's hand descend on her shoulder. "I don't know what to do, Sailor Moon. I... I can give her first aid, but we have to get her to a hospital."

>Lifting the distressed Senshi away from her crying friend, Sailor Moon showed her the Moon Wand. "It works to heal people who were possessed by youma. Maybe I can heal Venus. If I can't then we'll take you straight to the hospital. I promise, Mina-chan. You'll be OK, I promise!"

>Venus nodded her ascent, watching Sailor Moon through watery eyes. Blood continued to flow from her nose, staining the front of her sailor suit, but Venus felt hope as she watched Sailor Moon begin to inscribe a shining circle in front of her with the Moon Wand.

>"Moon... Healing... Escalation!"

>Sailor Venus gave a short scream as her arm shifted under the guidance of the magic, and quickly lost consciousness. Despite her friend's obvious agony, Sailor Moon completed her spell, grabbing

Mercury in a hug when she finished.

>"It worked! It worked! You'll be all right, Venus! Oh no. She's still knocked out... Jupiter, can you carry her? We have to get out of here."

>Three girls nodded in unison and soon the troop was heading through the city for somewhere that they could rest. As they ran, Sailor Mars stayed right beside Moon, her eyes constantly scanning the buildings for any sort of threat. "Let's head back to my place. We should be able to get some quiet there for a while."

>Mercury threw in her two cents also. "She's right. We have to talk about what's going on. Mako-chan and I found out something really scary at school. Can you call Luna and get her and Artemis to meet us at the Shrine?"

>With a nod, Moon keyed her communicator and listened for her advisor's voice. "Who is this?... Your... Your Majesty! You're alive! Where are you?"

>Sailor Moon spared a moment from her running to glare at the communicator. "What do you mean 'where am I'? Where have you been for the past week?... Wait! Don't tell me now. We just had a run in with some more Nega-creeps, and we're going to be at Rei's temple. We'll see you there!"

>On the way to the Hikawa shrine, Sailor Moon gently tried to ask Mercury how she failed to detect the approach of a pair of Negaverse Generals.

>"I didn't fail, really! I'm sure that they weren't Negaverse. I don't know what they were, but the Mercury computer was set to detect any approaching magic. Whoever they were, they were not Negaverse Generals, they just did not have the power."

>Jupiter snorted. "Tell that to my poor tummy! Whatever they shot me with sure felt like a magical blast."

>"Sailor Jupiter! You have to believe me! Whatever they used, it wasn't magic."

>Moon smiled and patted her friend on the shoulder as they ran. "I believe you, Mercury. You've never lied to us... So what was it?"

>"I... I don't know. My computer was set to look for magic powerful enough to be a threat, but it did not find it. All I can think of is that they must be normal humans, somehow."

>The tall, brown haired Senshi looked down at the comatose bundle in her hands and sighed. "Normal people do not throw energy blasts, and they sure can't take on five Sailor Senshi and do what they did to poor Venus. They weren't _normal_ humans by a long shot."

>It was a mystery of the modern world how an ordinary sized housecat could move quickly enough to keep up with a running girl, or how the Moon cats were able to come from whichever part of the city they were in to the shrine in such a short time. No matter what the mystery involved, the five untransformed Senshi had only been in the shrine for a matter of minutes before the black cat ran in through the door, panting and sounding like a distraught English nanny.

>"Oh, Your Majesty! I'm so glad that I found you! I've been so worried. I was out looking like you said all week and... Oh, I say. Princess Jupiter, Princess Venus. It's an honour to see you here too."

>Silence greeted her statements; silence and five gaping mouths. Minako had recovered enough that she was awake, and while her nose and arm no longer hurt, she felt incredibly tired. Despite that, there was no way that she was going to rest while everyone else found out what was going on. Minako's personal advisor, Artemis was still missing, so it was concern that made Minako the first to speak.

>"Where's Artemis, Luna?"

>"Well, he's outside at the moment."

>Usagi threw up her hands in exasperation. "Artemis, you silly cat! Come in here! We need everyone if we're going to figure out what to do."

>In mere moments the white cat was around the doorway, bowing and thanking Usagi. She just waved at him to be quiet, when his tail stood out straight like a rod and his eyes went wide. "Princesses Venus, Jupiter and Moon all in the room at the same time? This must be more serious than I thought. And things were bad enough before..."

>Before anyone else could speak, Ami coughed to get their attention. "Before we go any further with what happened this afternoon, I think I better tell you about what happened to Mako-chan and I at school."

>Both cats slunk back, and Artemis even went so far as to cover his head with one paw. Both were clearly expecting sparks to fly between the girls at any moment. "Oh, dear. What happened between you this time?"

>Watching the cats reactions, Makoto and Ami were the only people who were not stunned. Ami continued. "I think something really bad happened when we chased Diamond back here. Something serious that seems to have affected everyone aside from us."

>Her audience gripped her words, and Ami looked over to the cats. "Have you heard anything from Sailor Pluto in the last week? Do you know how we can get in contact with her?"

>"Sailor Pluto? No... We haven't been able to find any of the Outer Senshi that you asked us to look for. I'm sorry, Your Majesty."

>Before Usagi could blurt out the obvious question, Ami kept control of the questioning and tried to maintain some semblance of order.

"Who are the Outer Senshi?"

>"Why, the Senshi for the four Outermost planets of the solar system, Sailor Mercury. Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Do you remember when the summon call came?... Surely Your Majesty remembers ordering me to find the other Senshi?"

>Usagi shook her head numbly. She still could not grasp what was happening, and the concept of four more Senshi was quite overwhelming. Not to mention the fact that Luna kept calling her "Your Majesty" all the time.

>Ami took a deep breath. "This is what I was saying. Because the cats stayed here, they don't remember things the way that we do. I guess Mamoru-san should be all right since he came with us, but we'll have to wait and see. Perhaps if I start at the beginning, then we can see where things started to change..."
"Let's see, just after we finished fighting Emerald, she ran off back to the future. So Chibi-Usa told us that she had stolen a time key from Sailor Pluto, and she needed us to help her. After---"

>
"Just a moment, Sailor Mercury," Artemis interrupted. "Who is Chibi-Usa? And how did she steal a time key from Sailor Pluto?"

>
Usagi frowned and little thunderclouds appeared in her expression. "She's my daughter from the future, you silly cat. Or have you forgotten that already?"

>
Artemis cringed backwards and almost ran from the room. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty! I'm sorry!"

>
"And stop calling me 'Your Majesty'!"

>
Both cats blinked in silence. "But... What should we call you then?"

>
"I don't know... How about 'Usagi' like you usually do?"

>
"I never! Not even in private! I have always respected you, Your---." Seeing the threatening look in her mistress' eyes, Luna cut herself off. "I mean, I have always respected you, Usagi-sama."

>
"That's just as bad..." The blonde grumbled. Despite the tendency for the conversation to wander off track, Ami resolutely forced it back to the main issue: what was going on, and what had happened. In short order, the facts of the matter had become clear to everyone. With a careful line of questioning and by supplying her own answers wherever she could, Ami artfully reconstructed the events of the last six months. Six months of history changed by their time travel.

>
Six months ago the Negaverse had begun its invasion under the command of Queen Beryl. Since Luna's memory had been only slightly impaired, she had quickly recognised the Moon Princess as Sailor Moon. Naturally, at this point she had contacted Usagi and given her the transformation broach. It was on that first fateful night that things had began to change. Rather than encourage Sailor Moon to find the evil that she had detected, Luna had convinced the girl that she was too important to risk without having Senshi with her as support. The easily frightened Usagi had been effortless to convince, and the next day at school she had found a reason to regret that decision for the rest of her life.

>
The youma in the Osa*P jewellery shop had killed Usagi's best friend, Naru.

>
From that day forth, Artemis and Luna spun a story of a different Sailor Moon to the one that all the girls knew and loved. She was colder, harder and less trusting of the world. In the girl's timeline, it had been Usagi's naive, caring nature that had won over Kino Makoto so quickly. In this world, the girl that was Sailor Jupiter never gained that friend who convinced her to lose her violent ways. Learning that Sailor Moon was actually the Moon Princess, Sailor Jupiter had insisted on using her own title of Princess Jupiter. In times of great stress, sometimes the tall Senshi would work with the Moon Princess and her trusted allies, but those were few and far between.

>
The debacle with Sailor V and Artemis was even worse. Artemis had the misfortune to provide bad advice on a few occasions, and to console caution at other times. Branded a coward and incompetent by the Moon Princess, Artemis was banished from her sight forever. Insulted by the way that her friend and advisor had been treated after what appeared to her as accidents, Sailor Venus had left as well, with Princess Venus working independent of both Jupiter and Moon.

>
Relations between the Senshi were not good, and showed no signs of recovering. Hamstrung by the lack of support and sometimes clashing against their erstwhile allies, Beryl's defeat did not come quickly or easily. It was not until the Black Moon Family was operating in Tokyo that the Moon Princess managed to get the breaks that she needed to counter Beryl one-on-one.

>
Then, in a rare instance that all the Sailor Senshi had gathered in one place, disaster had struck a week ago. The girls had been standing around arguing when they felt pain spike through them and they collapsed to the street. Neither cat could do anything as they watched their charges writhe in agony. The girls were beginning to fade from view when they all felt it: the summon call to the Outer Senshi.

>
The summoning call was supposed to free the Outer's memories; awakening them to their power and destiny. Unfortunately it had been

cut short. Now, no-one could tell whether those girls were active or not, nor what memories and powers they had gained from their repertoire. Theoretically any of the Senshi could have been able to send the summoning, but they were all accounted for and in terrible pain.

>
The dying, vanishing, Sailor Moon had bid Luna one last request: she had to find the Outer Senshi and serve them as well as she had served herself. Even to her last breath, that Sailor Moon had ignored Artemis. Before the cats disbelieving eyes, all five of the Inner Senshi had finally vanished without a trace, leaving the felines to find and care for a new set of charges.

>
With the information provided by the Senshi around them - who had also related their much more pleasant history - Luna had come to the only possible conclusion. "If you really did time travel and meet Sailor Pluto, then she must have been the one to summon the Outer Senshi."

>
Usagi smiled, and looked up from where she was patting Artemis in her lap. He was obviously nervous, but the chance to be forgiven of his failings was a dream that had haunted him for months. "Why would she do that? I mean, it's nice to have extra help, but why then?"

>
Luna nodded and began to pace. It was Artemis who nervously spoke. Although his voice was quiet initially, it grew in confidence as Usagi did not curse or kick him as she had in the past - his past. "I think the answer to that is in two other questions: Why did she stop? And, why do you remember everything wrongly?"

>
"Hey! My memories aren't wrong! It must be yours."

>
"Usagi, he's right." Ami countered. "Sanity is always defined by the majority, and we are the only people who remember things differently. Either we're crazy or Diamond - and us - caused some sort of paradox. Only Sailor Pluto would have seen it, and she must have realised we would need all the help we can get."

>
The black cat nodded sagely as it stopped pacing. "Yes, that would also explain why she summoned all of the Outer Senshi. It might also explain why she stopped part way through, but only Sailor Pluto knows time travel well enough to be able to say for sure."

>
"You say that as though summoning all of them is a bad idea."

>
Luna looked up at Ami in confusion, then she hung her head. "That's right, your memories of the Silver Millennium are not all there. It means that she summoned Sailor Saturn."

>
Surrounded by blank looks, Luna jumped onto Sailor Jupiter's lap for some petting and took a moment to appreciate the luxury of having all the Senshi on one team like they were supposed to be. "If the Inner Senshi were policemen, the Outers were soldiers. I mean no disrespect, but because of their isolation, they tended to have stronger powers. You girls have pistols, the Outers had rifles, and Sailor Saturn was a little girl with an atomic hand grenade."

>"Sailor Saturn came into her powers too soon. She was too strong to be compared to anyone else and everyone was... Well... We were a bit afraid of her. Sailor Saturn lived alone almost her whole life. She was a very shy, insular, young girl, and she liked to stay that way.

"What was worse was that she liked to play with her power. I'll admit that sometimes the Senshi would put on a display or perform some marvel with their magic, but Sailor Saturn was different. She was like a child in a sand pit who delighted in dropping rocks to see what they did. With her sort of power, even a planet the size of

Saturn could hardly contain what she sometimes did for fun."

>
Usagi covered her mouth with her hand. "She never... She never hurt anyone... Did she?"

>
"When she played, no. Like the other Outer Senshi, she understood what being a soldier meant, and there were occasions when she had been required to weigh the life of a few people against a risk to the whole system.

>"Her judgements were always backed up by the Queen afterwards, but she was always so... eager. There were times when she was literally minutes away from cleansing an entire planet to protect the Kingdom."

>"Wh-What stopped her?"

>"They found an alternative. The first time six Senshi managed to defeat the alien that was attacking us on Mars. The second time, Sailor Mercury and a team of scientists managed to find a cure for a plague... on Earth."

>"On Earth? But what about the people? What about the Senshi there?"

>Luna looked sheepish. "If I remember her words correctly, 'they were expendable'."

>"That's terrible!" Usagi wailed. "But, what if she's awake here, now?"

>"We have two choices, since I know she will see either the Black Moon Family or the Deathbusters as sufficient cause to attack. Both of them at the same time... We can either hope that she failed to gain any of her attacks, which makes her useless as a Senshi, or we can hope that she gained none of her old personality. I'm afraid that neither of those is particularly likely."

>With a feeling of dread in her stomach, Usagi pressed on. She was not the cold, callused girl that Luna knew. She was still the carefree Usagi that her friends knew. Despite that, Usagi had a horrifying fear that she already knew what the cat was going to recommend. "What was the other choice?"

>"We work on the assumption that she retained at least some of her memories and capabilities. In that case, we have to subdue her before she can destroy us all."

>"You don't mean..."

>"I do. Sailor Saturn is as surely our enemy as any of the Witches. Just the same as that boy and girl who attacked you earlier."

>---
End Of Chapter.

4. The Winter Of Our Discontent

> \
 > | Vengeance And A Half |
 _____/

>
Thanks to my pre-readers:

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>
What has happened:

>The time travel of Prince Diamond and the Inner Senshi at the end of

Sailor Moon R has caused a paradox. Now the Outer Senshi are awake, the Death Busters are active, and the Dark Moon Family are still trying to conquer the world. In a desperate bid to stop a Daimon from gaining her Heart Crystal, the Outer Senshi were responsible for Akane's death. Now Nabiki has achieved the impossible and convinced Ranma and Ryoga to join forces.

>Feeling beset from all sides, the Inner Senshi must contend not only with the violent Sailors Uranus and Neptune who are set against them. They face Ranma and Ryoga, the unknown and lethal quantity of Sailor Saturn, innumerable witches and demons, and the fact that Chibi-Usa is one of the front line fighters for their dread enemy, the Dark Moon Kingdom.

>
Part 3: The Winter Of Our Discontent

>=====

>Haruka could not say just how she knew these things, but she had developed a sixth sense for danger and evil. It was not like her ability as Sailor Uranus to track and identify evil. This was purely subconscious, something that existed on a hidden level and caused her to be in the same place as the danger. It had become more apparent over the last week as she had fought more battles; something that allowed her to be where she was needed before the need arose, letting her transform and protect the innocent as only she could.

>The first few times that it had happened, Haruka had been willing to accept it as a coincidence. After repeating it almost every night, things went beyond simple chance. Without intending to, she would subtly change her daily routine, and something evil would appear, almost as though she had become a magnet for trouble. One evening she decided to stop and get an ice-cream on the way home. The ice-cream parlour that she chose was just slightly off course from her normal walk, and within a minute of her walking out of the store, a multi-headed demon had risen from the ground, stealing people's heart crystals.

>The same routine had occurred on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. By Thursday she was becoming paranoid. Sticking rigidly to schedule, Haruka decided to ignore the advertisement that she had seen for a new car dealership. To her horror, the papers revealed the next day that Sailor Neptune had fought a demon there single-handed. Haruka was clinging to her love of Michiru like a drowning woman thrown a life preserver, but that did nothing to dampen the inherited feelings that she had for the other Sailor. The thought of her friend -not lover, Haruka would not cast Michiru aside for that - in danger sent shivers down her spine.

>The notion that she might have gained a subconscious sixth sense, or even some greater sense of destiny, prompted Haruka to look up some facts on the existing Sailor Senshi. The newspaper archives at the library were liberally dosed with stories of their heroism. People saved and disasters averted, it was the materials that legends were made from. Although Haruka felt sorry for the people who were accidentally injured at times, the part of her that was Sailor Uranus dismissed it as irrelevant. People got hurt, but the Senshi got the job done.

>Only when a person intimately acquainted with the Senshi's capabilities and shortcomings examined the articles did a certain pattern emerge. No matter what the newspaper's speculation was, Haruka could be sure that it was impossible for a diverse group of girls to consistently run from their prior locations to the scene of the battle in the time that was mentioned. All that added up to one thing: she was not the only one who somehow found herself in the path of evil when it emerged. If she kept up with her solo activities, she

would continue to run into both the Inner Senshi, and most likely the remaining Outer Senshi.

>Haruka had seen Sailor Neptune before, and she knew that she was a woman that she could work with. It would be hard working with her and not falling in love again, but Haruka was confident that she could manage. The Inner Senshi were another matter; they were soft and weak, a danger to the Outers. Worse still, the younger girls had actively interposed themselves between Haruka and her work on more than one occasion already. If they failed to recognise the danger that the demons and the Heart Crystals represented, then the Inner Senshi were setting themselves against the good of the planet, and that was something that Haruka could not tolerate.

>Sitting down on a park bench, Haruka studied the Koi that frolicked in the water nearby. She had come to the realisation at school that she was probably destined to fight evil for the rest of her life, and there was no point in trying to avoid it. She would live her life as normally as possible, defending others whenever possible, but still trying to enjoy what she could.

>That was why she had come to the park this afternoon. Although she had often come here in the past to appreciate the greenery that was so rare in Tokyo, she had accepted that she might need to fight again this evening. Here... On the way home... Where she ate dinner perhaps. Somewhere nearby, something evil would come into existence, and Sailor Uranus might be the only one capable of stopping it. Simply by the law of averages, she might be the only Senshi in the area - assuming that the Inners were still willing and capable of fighting the enemy.

>The Inners were now fighting as a team, and then there was herself, and Sailors Pluto, Neptune and Saturn. She had bumped into Neptune several times, but so far she had not seen Pluto or Saturn. Pushing a stick through the grass with her feet, Haruka sighed. It was only a matter of time before Pluto and Saturn arrived at the same place that she did, and at the same time. Pluto was not a problem. From what she remembered from the Silver Millennium, the woman was just as determined and committed as Sailor Uranus.

>Sailor Saturn was another matter. Although it pained Haruka to think that the Inner Senshi were no longer capable of doing their job, and instead seemed to protect the enemies of the Earth like Black Lady, she could not compare them to Sailor Saturn. Saturn was simply too dangerous to allow to exist. Her petty ways and near-omnipotent power had no place in today's world.

>Admiring the way that the Koi instinctively grabbed for floating food on the water, Haruka resigned herself to someday having to defeat Sailor Saturn in combat. Both she and Saturn were like the Koi in many ways. The fish ate and acted on instinct. She and the Senshi of silence were warriors by instinct. Memories of their ancient selves moulded each of them. She became someone who could care about the world more than an individual, someone capable of doing what needed to be done. Sailor Saturn...

>Brushing off her school uniform, Haruka got to her feet and walked out of the park. There was no evil here. Maybe she was just being paranoid. It was all the thoughts of a deadly Sailor Saturn that was making her see an enemy at every junction. She should have known that not everywhere contained a demon lurking in the darkness.

>Dinner was light, just a small beef bowl with rice. Haruka did not want to fight on a heavy stomach, but she needed to put something away. She was just handing change to the shop assistant when screams rent the air. She was right. Somehow, once again she was in the right place to stop a demon and to save the world from their nefarious

schemes.

>Tossing the coins to the startled man behind the counter, Haruka was off like a rocket. Out the shop and to the left there was a small construction site, offering little in the way of concealment so that she could change with anonymity. Haruka was about to turn around when she spotted what she needed.

>It must have been placed there so that people could make calls even in the noise of nearby construction. A phone booth was something that had been almost entirely phased out in this day and age. With one hand on the door handle, Haruka looked around then dashed inside. "I bet Superman used to feel just as silly changing like this."

>The portable phone booth shook slightly and light filtered from under the door, but that was all that betrayed the presence of the pretty soldier changing into her fighting clothes. In mere moments the door slammed open and Sailor Uranus stepped out, fighting valiantly against the desire to declare she was there for truth, justice and the American way. At least she did not wear her underwear on the outside like some superheroes.

>By the time she reached the site of the disturbance, Sailor Neptune was there already. The Senshi with the aqua-marine coloured hair was laying down a withering series of attacks, desperately trying to keep the Daimon away from the slowly fleeing populace.

>One girl by herself would have a very hard time defeating something as strong as a Daimon. Uranus knew that from personal experience. Yesterday she had fought one to a standstill, but it had finally escaped from her. The only consolation she had been able to take from the fight was the fact that she had destroyed the Heart Crystal that it had been running with. Better that the unfortunate victim had died cleanly like that than allowing the Witches 5 and their Daimons to complete their plans.

>Sailor Uranus smiled as she brought her hands together in front of her and left fly with her own magic. One Senshi alone might not win, but there were better than even odds that the two of them could reduce this Daimon to dust on the wind.

>Watching the yellow magic of the World Shaking level a bookstore on top of the Daimon, Uranus' smile grew even larger. Someone's business was a small price to pay, and it would rest easier with her than the necessity of killing someone else. Sailor Uranus could do it, she could kill someone and not blink an eyelash. Tenou Haruka on the other hand, felt something within her die every time she untransformed and remembered the cost of saving the world. This time they might just get lucky.

>Luck did seem to be with them. While the Daimon was digging its way out from the tons of brick and rubble, Sailor Neptune gave her an update. Neptune had been next door looking at some shoes when she heard the Daimon announce its presence to the world. While she may have been wrong, Neptune was quite confident that no-one's Heart Crystal had yet been taken.

>"Look out, Neptune, it's coming out again."

>Uranus was right, unfortunately, she was also a second too late. The creature took hold of the smaller Senshi and held her aloft, shaking her back and forwards.

>"Neptune! No!"

>Fearful that her one reliable partner was about to have her soul stolen, Uranus closed and began to batter the wall of living flesh before her. Her blows would have shattered concrete, but against her adversary they barely managed to crack its armour. While Uranus might have been hamstrung by the fact that she did not want to hit the captive woman with her magic, Neptune was not constrained by anything

like that. Wrapped around the waist by a sludge-green tentacle, there was no real risk of a miss and that allowed Neptune to operate freely.

>"DEEP SUBMERGE!"

>Magic arrowed through the body hurting the monster, but it failed to sever the limb like Neptune expected. When she was freed from the crushing grip, the green-haired woman fell to her knees, suddenly too weak to stand. With her ally kneeling in the shop's rubble, Sailor Uranus was freed to act with less restraint, and she advanced fearlessly. Magically powered kicks rocked the monster from side to side as Uranus alternated attacking feet, stepping forwards to constantly maintain the pressure.

>Given time to recover, Neptune returned to her feet. She was weakened and shaky, but nothing could stop her from coming to the aid of the woman that she loved. Fighting demons and witches was hard enough. Fighting to contain the love that she felt for the other Senshi was beyond even her powers. Every day she told herself that she should break off with Haruka, but every day she waited, waited until there was time to confess her love to Sailor Uranus first.

>It was petty of her, Sailor Neptune realised, to be thinking of her own love in the middle of a fight like this. However, if they were not fighting to protect the people they loved, they why were they out here? Sailor Neptune recognised the area that they were in, and knew that Haruka would often walk home this way. If her friend had been nearby today... It hardly bore thinking on the fact that both women she loved could be in such danger.

>The danger to the women was something that Sailor Neptune was quite capable of doing something about. The risk of a car accident or being struck by lightning; these were beyond her control. A magically powered demon capable of draining people's life force or stealing Heart Crystals; she could take that any day, especially with Sailor Uranus by her side.

>Twin beams of magic dug into the monster, forcing it further and further back. They were finally getting on top of the problem when Sailor Uranus stopped briefly and said some very uncomplimentary words under her breath.

>"What? What's the matter?"

>"We've got bigger problems."

>The might have had bigger problems, but that did not stop Sailor Uranus from increasing her efforts against their attacker. Neptune was amazed for a moment, watching sweat pour from the girl's brow as she poured everything she had into the creature. Not understanding for a moment, Neptune was slow on the uptake. When she saw the small figure walking down the street towards them, she too placed her every effort into slaying the demon before it was too late.

>What they had seen down the street was enough to frighten anyone with the slightest information. There was Sailor Saturn, walking calmly towards them, carrying a seven-foot weapon of mass destruction. A completely unintimidating four-foot in height, the girl was their worst nightmare brought to life. Obviously she did not consider a single demon attack to be a great worry, as she was calmly walking towards them. While their attention was on the dying creature, the smallest Senshi jogged for a few steps, but all too soon she was reduced to a walk.

>The Outer Senshi saw nothing of her efforts to join them in battle. All they saw was their own fear personified and embedded into an individual they only knew through memories.

>"What do you think she'll do?" Neptune asked.

>Stopping long enough to look at their approaching doom, Uranus

shuddered. "Just as guess?... I think she'll come about twenty feet closer, then she'll kill you, me, the Daimon and everything in five hundred meters just to be sure."

>"That's not a very pretty picture."

>"She wasn't called the Senshi Of Destruction for nothing, you know."

>Knowing that their lives hung in the balance, Uranus and Neptune finally managed to sufficiently damage their opponent. When it crumbled to dust and a small crystal landed in the pile of its ashes, Neptune started. "It was a Droid, not a Daimon. That's why I felt so weak!"

>"No need to worry about that now, we have bigger problems."

>Bigger problems indeed. Now that she had time to look, she could see that the woman - girl really - coming towards them was definitely Sailor Saturn. Her clothing was a little different from Neptune or Uranus, but other than the wings, she easily fit the template of a Senshi's possible attire. The face was one that she recognised from her memories, the face of Sailor Saturn.

>The smiling face of Sailor Saturn looked at them as the young girl continued to advance. It was the smile more than anything that terrified the other two girls. Neptune took an involuntary step backwards. "S-She's smiling..."

>"Just like she used to."

>Gathering her courage, Neptune stood shoulder to shoulder with her taller companion who nodded. "Just like she used to when she wanted to play."

>With dread certainty in her voice, Neptune whispered. "We're going to die, aren't we. There's no way that we can get far enough away from that thing if she wants us."

>Uranus was silent for a moment, dredging through ancient memories. "There is... There is one way. She can't attack us if she's defending! Come on, now is our chance to make sure that everyone will always be safe from her."

>Confused for a moment, Neptune rapidly followed. If Sailor Uranus had a plan, then any chance was better than dying where they stood, killed by a insensitive, uncaring brat, whose only thought was to make sure the Droid was really and completely dead.

>Sailor Neptune was stunned when she watched her friend fire magic at the little girl without breaking stride. She should not have been surprised, but she was. While she had accepted the hypothetical idea that they might have to kill the deadly Senshi, it had not penetrated to her soul. Despite the Sailor uniform, she was still a school-girl at heart, unlike her companion. She envied the way that Sailor Uranus had retained so much of her old mindset. To be able to accept what they needed to do so easily, surely it must be a blessing.

>Because she had fired while she was moving, Sailor Uranus failed to get a good hit. All that she did was burn a strip of flesh off the girl's arm, half turning her from the impact of the magical energy. Sailor Neptune was slower to react, and her own Deep Submerge slammed into an invisible shield in front of Sailor Saturn.

>"Damn! It's the Silence Wall!"

>Uranus grinned back at her. "That's perfect. She can't attack us while she has that up. Just keep firing."

>After another attack that failed to penetrate, Sailor Neptune was grinning from ear to ear. "She can't move either. Look at her: she's got to keep the Silence Glaive grounded. There's no way she can win!"

>* * *

>Silence Girl, aka Sailor Saturn, aka Tomoe Hotaru, could not understand what had gone wrong. When she had heard the sounds of fighting she had come running as quickly as she could, hoping to put her new magical girl powers to good use. Instead, her illness had forced her to arrive right at the end, only in time to see the tall, proud looking magical girls reduce the scary monster into nothingness.

>Smiling happily, she kept walking, hoping to join them. Their costumes were not as fancy as hers, and from what she could see, they were nowhere near as powerful as she was. She guessed that made her the leader, it did in all the movies and books. When she watched the older girls standing on the rubble of a shop and assessing her, she hoped that her costume made her look as mature as she needed to. What if they disputed her leadership? What if they wanted to keep fighting with the other magical girls out there? What if they were not ready to end the war that was going on in Tokyo? Surely she could make them understand that they could all live together in peace.

>Her dreams turned to ashes for a second time that day when the big girl had run at a diagonal to her. Not understanding what was about to happen, Hotaru had been caught flat footed, and it was only luck that saved her from being blasted into little bits. Despite the risk that Silence Girl was destined for the shortest career as a heroine in history, she reacted with the instincts of a true warrior.

>The impregnable magic of the Silence Wall whispered into existence ahead of her. Each time one of them fired, Hotaru could feel the jolt through her palms, and she could feel her own power weaken slightly. Both of the big bullies were ganged up against her now, and their magic flailed against her shield in an almost unending rhythm of destruction. The slightest wavering, the merest weakening would allow those deadly bolts through, and they would complete the job that the blonde woman had started.

>Holding her shield was not too difficult, but it was getting progressively harder, even though she brought the size of the Wall back and back, slowly defending less and less. It was leaving her open for an attack from the side or behind, but she did not have a choice. If she failed to keep up her protection, then the evil magical girls in front of her would surely break through, ending her mission of peace.

>A brief synchronisation of attacks brought the little girl to her knees. Green and gold impacted her shield, now hardly larger than herself. She could stop them, she was sure. But if she lowered the Silence Wall, they would hit her, maybe even kill her. The fear of her own death was not what stopped Hotaru from unleashing her terrible power. It was the certain knowledge that there were hundreds or thousands of innocent people behind her assailants. The Silence Glaive Surprise would doom them all, and even assuming she survived, her life would not be worth living after that.

>That was why Tomoe Hotaru cried. It was not the wound on her arm; despite the fact that her healing held no power over herself. It was not even the fact that she had not even managed to succeed at whatever purpose that she had been put here for. She cried for her father and girls like these, so taken in by evil that they would turn on anyone that offered to help them.

>Struggling back to her feet, Hotaru wished she could at least spare a hand to wipe her face. Both hands were needed to wield the Silence Glaive, so she had to live with the fact that her vision was clouded with tears and her nose was running. She was so scared she wanted to pee, but she would die on her feet, with whatever dignity she could muster. At least she had tried. Squaring her shoulders, Hotaru gave

everything she could to Silence Wall, and hoped that a handsome White Knight would save her in the nick of time.

>Her rescuer would hardly have been considered a handsome White Knight under the circumstances.

>* * *

>This evening's patrol had started much better this time. Ranma and Ryoga had not gotten separated, and they had been out for almost an hour. Both of them were casually jogging along the rooftops or through the streets. Ryoga constantly kept Ranma in sight, and they both kept their eyes open. With luck, they would come across a demon or a Senshi and be able to help put things to right.

>Nabiki had not managed to give them more than an initial guess, but it looked like the area west of the Imperial Residence was the most likely site for a demonic invasion. Even just that information cut out vast areas of searching. Some demon sightings still occurred elsewhere, but there were more of them on the west side. Despite their physical prowess, Ranma and Ryoga were only human, and could use every advantage they got.

>At around six in the evening, with the sun sinking below the tall buildings and shadows beginning to cloak the city, Ryoga stopped on the sidewalk and looked around. Checking his headlong pace, Ranma circled back and walked up to his friend.

>"What is it?"

>"Shhh..."

>Ryoga was silent for a moment, tracking his head back and forwards. "I thought I heard a... There it is again!"

>Ryoga turned and took a few steps in one direction before Ranma snagged his arm and pulled him in the opposite direction. "Huh? I thought you couldn't hear it?"

>Ranma smirked in an immensely irritating fashion. "Nope, just call it a hunch."

>"Why you..." Ryoga had one hand raised to deliver a pile driver punch to the back of Ranma's head when they cleared a pair of buildings. Suddenly the sound was much louder, unobstructed by as many intervening buildings.

>"Fighting..."

>It did not matter who said it; indeed, perhaps they both did. All that mattered was the sound. Nothing quite sounded the same as a magical discharge. Although they had never heard these particular sounds before, the sound was quite distinctive. Ki attacks had their own sound, and this was nothing like gunfire or fireworks. Somewhere nearby they could hear the sound of things begin destroyed under a fusillade that defied normal description.

>Without thought or discussion, the boys were moving. Yesterday Ryoga had convincingly established that there was more than one type of magical girl in the city, but no matter who was fighting - friend or foe - Ranma and Ryoga wanted to be there. If there was a demon, they wanted to kill it. If it was one of the Sailor Senshi, they wanted to kill them. If neither of those was there, then just maybe they would leave, or maybe there was someone they could help.

>At a dead sprint, focusing all their thoughts on what lay ahead, neither Ranma nor Ryoga noticed their surroundings. Years of martial training would automatically kick in should any sort of threat arrive, but what caught them was no ordinary threat.

>With both boys being Jusenkyo cursed, the compulsion for water to leap out and strike them was almost enough to bend the laws of physics or at least skew probability into the most unlikely of regions. Some might say that they should have recognised this small, almost insignificant flaw in their plan. Unfortunately, hindsight is always twenty-twenty, and it was not until a ferociously frowning

Ranma-chan slowed to a halt in the middle of a garden bed did they realise their problem.

>If it were just Ranma that had been caught when the sprinklers activated, there would have been no problem. What his girl form sacrificed in strength, she made up for in speed. Alternatively, when Ryoga's curse was activated, he sacrificed size, strength, endurance and speed for cuteness and edibility... Neither of which helped greatly in battle.

>Squatting down next to the little pig, Ranma poked his snout with a finger and squinted. "I'm beginning to understand why you don't like being P-Chan."

>P-Chan gave a small, piggy growl. It was not his usual pig response meaning: "Ranma, I intend to kill you for tormenting Akane-san and I." Instead, this was a different grunt, it somehow managed to imply urgency, longing and a desire for battle. Ranma looked at the pig quizzically. "You'll be all right if I leave you here?"

>A nod this time. Ryoga was used to being a pig. If there was ever a competition for surviving as a very delicious pig while completely lost, Ryoga knew that he could win it hands down. He appreciated Ranma checking that he was all right, but time was short. By the time P-Chan could convey to Ranma the location of the thermos in his pack, the battle might be over. Whoever was fighting needed Ranma now. Ryoga knew that Ranma was not as much use as he was in a fight, but even little help would be better than no help.

>Ranma hesitated for another moment, but when P-Chan bunted her leg with his snout then went rooting around in his pack, Ranma turned and left. Ryoga should be safe as a pig; whoever was being attacked by one of the Witches or the Sailor Senshi, they were the ones whose life hung in the balance.

>Two more streets took Ranma to a roof that she could look down onto the combat that was making the noise. If she was not so inured to world-shaking shocks, this one would have rattled her and kept her indecisive for long, possibly lethal moments. To first appearances, it looked as though the Sailor Senshi were fighting amongst themselves. Two girls dressed as Senshi appeared to be attacking a third. If Ranma was not so used to having her world set upon its head, this view may have shocked her long enough for the bigger girls to win.

>Being used to the unusual, Ranma almost instantly accepted that her enemies were fighting each other. This allowed her to watch analytically and think. The two girls doing all of the attacking were definitely Senshi; they matched Nabiki's description closer than any of the five she and Ryoga had already fought. The third girl... She was different.

>Looking closely, Ranma compared the small girl on the defensive with what she knew of the Senshi. While her uniform was similar, the little girl had a number of subtle differences, like the length of her bows and the shape of her shoulder guards. Then there were the no-so-subtle differences: large white wings on her back, a massive spiked gem on her chest and a huge pole-arm. None of the Senshi carried weapons, and none of them looked like that.

>What finally made up Ranma's mind were two simple things. Firstly, the girl was so young. Ranma could hardly believe that she was a teenager, and matched up against the Senshi, she seemed weak and puny. Most importantly, the girl was not attacking. In the past, the Senshi had a history of indiscriminately blasting the bad guys, and anyone who got in the way... Like a certain fiancée.

>True to form, Ranma was off the building and moving before she had consciously come to the decision to save the girl. Part way through her fall to the ground, Ranma had already done the battlefield

analysis and had decided how she would win this battle. The two attackers were trying to batter their way through some sort of energy shield that the little girl had erected. Ranma could tell that because every time one of the magical attacks neared the girl, it struck an invisible wall and detonated. The ground around the girl was in perfect shape, defended by the shield, but that area was shrinking with every attack. This was making the girl more and more vulnerable, and in just a few more minutes - minutes that Silence Girl did not have - that shield would not even cover her body.

>Coming in fast and slightly from behind, Ranma timed her sprint to reach the little girl just as the latest pair of kaleidoscopic attacks sent waves of energy everywhere. Without a pause in her charge, Ranma wrapped an arm around the girl and headed for the side of the road. She guess she had about four, maybe as much as five seconds before the Senshi would fry her and her passenger, but with a little luck, she would be sheltered by a building in that time.

>It was four point two-seven seconds when the Earth Shaking ripped the side off the building, but it was time enough. Ranma and her cargo were saved from that blow, and any following ones simply impacted on the side of the building without reaching them.

>Seeing that the little girl in her arms was not trying to struggle, Ranma kept running. Weaving a zigzag course through the streets, Ranma put as much distance between herself and the Senshi. She did not know whether they would pursue, or how long, but she knew that if she needed to stop and fight, she would be in serious difficulty. Tired from a run while carrying a passenger - despite the girl's light-weight - Ranma would be facing two deadly opponents while having to defend someone. Not really the best way to win a fight.

>After twenty minutes of headlong, confusing flight through the city at the best pace that she could manage, Ranma stumbled to a halt and placed the little girl on her feet. Leaning over with hands on her knees, Ranma sucked in deep lungfuls of air. This was the moment of truth: if this was really one of the Sailor Senshi, she would doubtless try to slay Ranma where she stood, simply because she was allied with Ranma's other enemies. Ranma doubted this would happen, she was confident that this was not one of the dreaded Sailor girls.

>"Are... Are you all right?" The voice was quiet, very quiet, and Ranma had to strain to hear her. "Miss?"

>"Call me Mister. My name's Ranma."

>As Ranma brushed the sweaty locks from her eyes, she looked up to see the girl bowing to her. "Thank you, Ranma-san. You saved me... I... I couldn't stop them..."

>"Aww, it ain't nothing. Are you... Are you one of the Sailor Senshi?"

>The little girl in the sailor suit shook her head. "No. I'm Silence Girl, I'm here to stop all the fighting, and make everyone be nice to each other! I'm the most powerful magical girl in the whole world!"

>"Ah, yeah, sure... That's why those two Senshi were about to kill you, right?"

>Instantly the girl's big purple eyes began to brim with tears and her bottom lip began to tremble. "I... I... I..."

>"Geez, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. It's just, you know..."

>Silence Girl sniffled a few more times and looked at Ranma. After a

few moments of indecision, she closed her eyes and concentrated. Briefly, Ranma was blinded by a bright light, and when she could see again, in the place of Silence Girl stood a small school girl. Out of the costume, she looked just as young. Her green plaid skirt and neat blazer suggested at a private school, but Ranma paid that little mind. It was where she stood in this war that mattered, not where she was educated.

>"My name's Hotaru, Tomoe Hotaru. I just call myself Silence Girl when I use my magic."

>"Oh... I'm Saotome Ranma."

>"Are you a magical girl too, Ranma-san? You must be to since you are so fast and strong. What does your costume look like? What's your magical girl name?"

>"Hey! I ain't a girl, I'm a guy! And my only name is Saotome Ranma, of the Saotome School Of Anything Goes Martial Arts. I'm a martial artist, understand? I don't need no magic to make me fast."

>"But... But you rescued me... How could you rescue me when you aren't a magical girl?"

>Putting a hand on Hotaru's shoulder, Ranma lead her to a small bench and sat down next to her. It was a shaded area that salary men used to eat their lunch during the day, but at this time of evening, it was almost deserted.

>"Look, Hotaru, I don't need no magic because I train hard. I've trained hard my whole life, I dedicated absolutely everything to the Art. If you've got magic, that's great, but it don't make you better than me."

>Hotaru looked down, finding something very interesting to look at on the tips of her shoes. "I am. I'm stronger than anyone. I'm so strong, I'm the only one that can stop all this fighting."

>"Yeah, well if you're so strong, why couldn't you stop them attacking you."

>"..."

>Leaning closer, Ranma put her head next to Hotaru's. "You'll have to say that again, I couldn't hear you."

>Her proximity seemed to open a floodgate, and instantly Hotaru had her in a death grip, bawling her eyes out. "I couldn't do it! I couldn't stop them without killing them, and I couldn't do it. Even if everyone in the buildings behind them was gone, I still couldn't kill them! What good are my powers if I couldn't even stop two magical girls from attacking me? I couldn't help Father, and I couldn't stop them! What am I going to do?..."

>Tentatively, Ranma tried placing her arms around the sobbing girl. Although she was four years older than Hotaru, Ranma's female form did not greatly eclipse her in height. Consequently, it was more like hugging a friend or younger sister than a daughter, and Ranma patted the girl on the back and tried to calm her down. While Hotaru cried and tried to calm herself, Ranma reflected that it was good that none of her fiancées were here to see them. Despite the fact that Hotaru was much too young for her, Ranma knew that she would be in trouble if anyone saw them. Ranma the pervert, that was what they would call her. Going after young girls now. With a sniff, Ranma blinked her eyes and looked imperiously into the distance. Her fiancées could say whatever they wanted, Ranma was not after Hotaru, she just could not stand to see a girl cry. Even if Akane came along with her mallet and...

>But of course, Akane would never hit Ranma with her mallet again. She would never call Ranma a pervert or chase of any of Ranma's other fiancées. She would never wrongly get upset at Ranma innocently

comforting a stranger. She would never do anything again.

>Relaxing slightly, Ranma leaned on Hotaru a little. They might not be saying anything, but now that Hotaru was no longer crying, Ranma was beginning to feel better. Just having someone to hold was nice. Ranma wished that she could hold Akane like this, and tell her how much she missed the uncute tomboy.

>A couple of minutes later, Hotaru wiped her eyes and pulled away slightly. "Thank you, Ranma-san. I'm sorry. I don't usually cry like that. It's just that..."

>Ranma nodded. She was never good with explaining emotions and stuff like that either. "I know what you mean. It's... Yeah, it's like that..."

>Hotaru nodded, again looking down at her feet. "I... I have to go... I can't stay here all night."

>Ranma looked around and noticed how dark it was. Surely it must be past eight o'clock by now. "You alright to get home from here?"

>"Home..." Hotaru said in a quiet voice. Suddenly she jumped to her feet and stared straight ahead with braced shoulders and a set look in her eyes. "I'm Silence Girl! There's nothing in this city that _I_ need to be frightened of!"

>"Ahh... You sure?"

>Trying to look very determined, Hotaru gave a short sharp nod and refused to meet Ranma's eyes. "I am. I live near here."

>"Well... OK then. I gotta go find Ryoga... I guess I'll be seeing you around. Look out for those Senshi, understand?"

>Hotaru looked at where her saviour was departing into the night and sighed once before sitting down. Despite what she had told Ranma-san - whom she was secretly convinced was actually a magical girl too - Hotaru was not sure whether she would be all right tonight. She had only said it to reassure Ranma-san. Silence Girl was supposed to be the strongest magical girl in Tokyo. It was bad enough that she had needed to be saved by someone on her first night out, how was she supposed to save the city if she told Ranma-san what the situation really was?

>Her father had been taken over by an evil spirit, and she had destroyed her own home that morning. Her bed, her clothes, all her nice warm blankets were gone. Even if they still existed, she could not go back to them because of her father. She had to be strong. She had to be strong like Ranma-san! If Ranma-san could dedicate her life to marital arts, Hotaru would dedicate hers to being a magical girl!

>If Ranma-san was strong enough to save her, then surely Hotaru could be strong enough to get through a night in the city. She was Silence Girl! She had nothing to fear! No-one could attack her, and she could fly away from all her problems! Nothing would stop Tomoe Hotaru, premier magical girl in all of Tokyo. She would show everyone. She would stop all the fighting, and make her father well again.

>Giving a little shake to warm herself in the chill night air, Hotaru looked around. She would have really liked somewhere warm to sleep, but she had not managed to find shelter all day. Sitting in a corner of the little eating nook, Hotaru drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. It was cold tonight, but she was always hearing on the news how people slept on the street. She would be fine for tonight. Then, tomorrow, she would find somewhere better. Somewhere warm. Somewhere that she could have dinner before going to bed.

>As she sat shivering in the corner, Hotaru began to wish that she had swallowed her pride a bit sooner and asked Ranma-san for help. Surely she would have had somewhere nice to sleep.

>* * *

>Nabiki looked up as someone opened the front door. She was too tired to rise in greeting, so she just lay down her pencil and braced her chin on her hand. The way she was feeling, it could be a burglar and she would not have the energy to resist them from stealing everything. Of course, with Kasumi and Daddy asleep and Mister Saotome out meditating near the Koi pond, she would not be able to do particularly much if it was a thief. Of course, there were no thieves local to Nerima that would be stupid enough to try robbing their house.

>After a moment, the sound of quarrelsome voices came from the hallway, and Nabiki sighed. It was her team of casual heroes coming home for the night. With a glance, Nabiki looked at the clock on the screen of her laptop and blinked a few times in surprise. She could have sworn that it was only nine or ten, but the computer never lies, and it said that it was a quarter to twelve.

>"I can't believe you, Ryoga. You wandered off three times tonight!" Judging by that voice, Ranma must have gotten wet some time during their patrol.

>"I did not!"

>"You did! What about that time when we were near the subway station?"

>"I was just investigating a sound that I heard..."

>"Yeah, like I've never heard a train around there." Ranma's voice was full of scorn.

>"Raaaaanma!"

>When they came into the living room, the boy and girl were almost at each other's throats. After a short moment, Ranma noticed Nabiki sitting there watching them and lowered her fist. When his opponent dropped her guard, Ryoga looked around a few times then spotted Nabiki. With an embarrassed look on his face, Ryoga gave a strained chuckle and refrained from hitting anyone.

>"Nice to see you again. Not enough Senshi to fight to calm you down?"

>The reaction to her little jibe was hardly what she could have expected. Both of them snarled and clenched their fists in agitation and frustration. "Whoa! Whoa! Calm down! It was just a question."

>Shaking herself slightly, Ranma walked into the room fully and proceeded to slump down bonelessly next to Nabiki. "Sorry, Nabiki. We just had a bad night."

>When Ryoga sat down on the opposite side of the table, Nabiki closed the lid of her laptop and eased her injured arm into a more comfortable position. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

>Ryoga grunted and lay back, staring at the ceiling. "It seemed we were just too late almost everywhere we went tonight. No matter how fast we moved, we would always get there just as a demon escaped, or just as the Senshi finished killing one."

>"At least the _Senshi_ didn't kill no-one tonight," Ranma added.

>"The Senshi didn't? Do you mean a demon did?"

>"Yeah. Just to the west of Shinjuku. It vanished just as we turned up. It killed two people in their home. I can't believe it, there wasn't even a mark on them, but just lay there. They... They died before the ambulances arrived."

>Everyone was silent at that. Until two weeks ago, Nabiki was the only one of the three of them that had ever seen a dead person, and

that was her mother in the coffin. This evening, Ranma and Ryoga had seen more death than they ever wished to see, and certainly more than they ever deserved to. It was part of the greater tragedy that while the Senshi were uncaring murderers, the demons that they fought were just as bad or even worse.

>Nabiki was going to ask for some more details on the demon attack when her exhaustion dulled mind caught something that she should have noticed when Ryoga first mentioned it. "Hey, Ryoga, you said were too late 'almost everywhere'. What happened the rest of the time?"

>"Err... You'll have to ask Ranma, you see, I was..."

>"What P-Chan here is trying to say is that when we got splashed with water, he got lost. We could hear someone fighting, so I couldn't wait for him."

>Ryoga gave Ranma a brief smile and a supportive grunt. He did not like it when people implied that a martial artist as strong as him could get lost easily, but it was better than telling Nabiki about him changing into a pig. His carefree days with Akane might be over now, but his curse would surely haunt him to the end of his days.

>While Ryoga was distracted by thoughts of Akane, Ranma gave a concise run down on Silence Girl and how she had saved her.

>"You think she could have been telling the truth, Nabiki? She didn't exactly look like a Senshi, but she was pretty close."

>Propping himself onto the edge of the table, Ryoga looked at the other through eyes half closed from sleepiness. "Don't forget Black Lady. She was pretty obviously a magical girl. That's means the Senshi aren't the only ones around."

>Nabiki nodded non-committally. Turning her laptop, she opened it up so that the three of them could see the screen. "While you were out I was doing some more research. It's amazing what you can turn up when you spend enough time looking for it."

>Opening a presentation on the computer, Nabiki showed them a series of photographs of varying quality. Some were excellent pictures, nice and sharp. Others were grainy and indistinct.

>"Here are pictures of all of the Senshi that anyone has been able to identify. They're mostly named for the planets, but there are a few planets missing. Let's see... Mercury... Venus... They usually call this one Moon, one of the newspapers called her Earth, but generally she's called Sailor Moon... Mars... Jupiter... Again, we don't have anyone for Saturn... Uranus... Sorry about the quality of this one, it seems as though no-one has managed to get a decent picture of Sailor Neptune yet. They don't have a Sailor Pluto either, or at least no-one has ever seen her. You'll also notice that none of the pictures match the description of your mystery girl. Looks like you're in the clear on that one too."

>"Wow! That was great, Nabiki! How'd you get so much stuff on them?"

>Nabiki waved her hand. "Thanks, Saotome. It's not that much for someone as good as me, but it's a start. Tomorrow I'm going to get some pamphlets printed warning people about them. Do you think you could drop them off tomorrow when you are running around?"

>"Yeah, I guess... You know, that's a pretty good idea. If people know to run away from them, they'll be safer."

>Brushing hair back from her face, Nabiki yawned mightily. "It's good, but it's not perfect. You saw how bad that picture of Neptune was. You'd hardly be able to recognise her... Do you want to know

what has me really worried? By all accounts, Sailor Neptune and Sailor Uranus did not even exist until less than a month ago. We've still got two or three planets unclaimed. What if they get Senshi?"

>Soberly, Ranma nodded, but she did not interrupt as Nabiki continued. "It gets worse. What if there was a Sailor Asteroids and a Sailor Sun? That would take them to twelve. Now they've already got a Sailor Moon... What's to stop them from having Sailors for some of the really big moons around Jupiter and Saturn? I know you guys are good, but can you honestly take on fifteen or twenty of these girls?"

>They both nodded. "We can, because we have to. It's a martial artist's duty to protect the weak. Nothing will ever bring Akane back, but I can't sit around and let someone else get hurt like that."

>There was silence for a moment. Everyone in the room knew that if the two of them fought twenty Sailor Senshi tomorrow, there would be two less martial artists in the world, no matter how hard they tried. Looking for a change of subject, she made a quick check of the clock on the wall. Nabiki was stunned to see just how late it was, all that research and then talking just ate through the hours. "Listen, I've got to get some sleep. You two ought to rest as well. With the amount of training and fighting that you've been doing, you'll need it."

>"Come on, Ryoga. I'll take you up to the room."

>Rolling onto the floor, Ryoga turned away from Ranma. "I'll just sleep here. It's better than being outside, which is where I usually sleep."

>Too tired herself to argue with him, Ranma followed Nabiki up the stairs. Pausing in the hallway, she watched as Ranma walked past her room. "Where are you off to, Saotome? Has being with Ryoga too much affected your sense of direction too?"

>Pausing with one hand on Akane's door, Ranma turned back to the girl who might have been his sister-in-law if things had turned out differently. "Just going to say goodnight. Goodnight and get some advice before I go to bed."

>"Don't go strange on me, Saotome. We can't afford to lose you."

>Ranma gave a wan smile. "I'll be fine. I guess I just miss being hit on the head with a mallet."

>Nabiki stared at him intently for a few long moments, then nodded her head and went to bed. She would have to watch that boy. She knew that he was quite attached to her sister, despite the way that he acted. If he started to lose his grip... She would be the only one around that might be able to convince him to keep going, at least until the Senshi were defeated.

>* * *

>Morning came far too early for Ranma. After a series of days of rigorous training with Ryoga followed by nights patrolling with him, Ranma was beginning to feel as though he needed a rest. With a quick groan, Ranma pushed his self-pity aside and sat up. The Sailor Senshi and the demons were too powerful for him to slack off. If he took a day to rest, that would be one day more that Akane's killers would have before he brought justice to them.

>Sitting on the futon on the floor, Ranma had the distinct impression that someone was watching him. Swivelling his head, he turned and saw his father. Genma was sitting cross-legged near the door; despite his human form, he still looked like a panda the way he sat. The big man's eyes might have been closed, and his head bowed, but Ranma knew from experience that he was as alert now as he ever was.

>Blinking blearily, Ranma was about to start off the day with a refreshingly insulting comment when his father spoke and beat him to the punch.

>"You, my son, are the sole air of the School of Anything Goes Martial Arts. Not just the Saotome School, Boy, but the Tendo School too. In you I have invested every minute of my life. You are the future of our schools and our art."

>Shaking the sleep from his mind, Ranma flipped to his feet and began to move to the door. A bath, breakfast, then some stretching. Paying the usual attention to his father's rambling, Ranma proceeded to walk past him and completely missed his father's quick strike until he was flat on his back.

>"What did you do that for, Old Man?"

>"Listen to me, Boy. You are the sole heir. You alone have the knowledge to continue the School. What will happen to the School if you get frozen like Ryoga did the other day?"

>With a single wrench of his stomach muscles, Ranma bent himself through the middle and grabbed the lapels of his father's Gi. "What makes you think I care about the School any more, Old Man? Get it through your head! Akane's dead! There is no future!"

>Finally Genma opened his eyes and looked into his son's eyes. Centimetres away from each other, they eyed each other, lightning almost seeming to fly between they fixed stares. "Do you know what the School is, Ranma? Do you know what it is that I have trained you for?"

>"Who knows what you do anything for?"

>"I did it for you, Boy. You are the School. You are the future. You are the one that needs to be the true Master of the art."

>Shifting his grip so quickly that his hands blurred, Ranma had Genma in a headlock. "That's right, Old Man. I'm the Master, not you, so don't even think of telling me what to do."

>"Gasp!... You are only the Master if you can defeat the Senshi... What happens the first time one of them manages to hit you?"

>Ranma's grip slackened slightly. As much as he hated to admit it, his stupid father was right for once. If the Senshi won, he would be dead, and Master of nothing. If they encased him in ice like they did to Ryoga, he was finished. If they hit him with any of the attacks that they had thrown so far, he would be in a world of hurt.

>"So what are you gonna do about it, Old Man? Stop them with all that blubber? Laugh them to death with the funny Panda act?"

>"Your old man isn't out of tricks yet, Boy!"

>With a deft movement, Genma snaked a foot under Ranma and flipped his son in mid-air. Before the young man could react, Genma pitched him out the open window and into the Koi pond outside.

>"Hey! What did you do that for?"

>Standing inside the window, Genma looked down on the small form of his son in the pond. As much as he hated to admit it, Ranma's speed in this form was unrivalled. That speed would be the first key to her invulnerability.

>"Get out of the water boy, and build a fire in the yard. You've got some serious training to do."

>While the female Ranma muttered derogatory comments about pandas and parents, Genma went down to collect Ryoga. In all honesty, Genma did not particularly like Ryoga. The boy had constantly trying to get between Genma and a happy retirement, or more precisely, between Ranma and Akane. Ryoga did, however, provide a perfect training

partner for Ranma, since he was the only boy in the area that approached Ranma's skill.

>Most importantly, this aggressive, sullen boy was the one fighting next to his son in a battle to the death. Genma was well aware that if Ryoga were to fall to the Senshi or a demon, his son would fall soon after. Kicking the protesting Ryoga out of the house, Genma dragged the rapidly awakening boy to the campfire that Ranma had set up.

>"I'm not going to say that I'm better than you, we don't have time for me to be able to prove it. What I will say is that I have thirty years more experience than either of you, and I know things you have never even thought of. Today, I shall begin to train you and make you the greatest fighters to ever walk Japan."

>Neither boy - although Ranma was arguably more of a girl at the moment - was happy at their treatment. It was them that had been going out and taking the fight to the enemy. Genma had simply stayed at home, claiming to be defending Nabiki and Kasumi, but in reality, they knew that he spent all of his time meditating outside. Actually, he claimed that he was meditating; for all they knew, he was probably sleeping.

>Producing a packet of chestnuts from within his Gi, Genma liberally sprinkled them into the fire. "Boy! Get them out."

>With the shout of "Kachuu Tenshin Amaguriken," Ranma went into action. Moving so fast his hands ceased to be individual items, but instead became a blur. In mere moments, dozens of fresh roasted chestnuts were resting in a pile on the ground.

>"What was the use of that, Ranma? Everyone knows you can do that. I want Ryoga to do it."

>This time when Genma seeded the fire, Ryoga narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists. There was no way that he would ever admit to Ranma being better than him. He would never allow his rival to show him up like this... "YAAAAHHHH!"

>Ryoga's arms shot forward at a speed that few humans could match. Darting into the fire, he grabbed handful after handful of the nuts, but his speed was no match for the dreaded Roasting Chestnuts Over An Open Fire technique. In short order, Ryoga was bouncing around the lawn, waving his hands madly and trying to put out his burning sleeves.

>While Ranma laughed and almost choked on the chestnuts she was eating, Genma went to the remains of the dojo and grabbed a couple more pieces of wood. "Boy, that was terrible! I used to think that Ranma was slow, but you were disgusting! How can you call yourself a martial artist?"

>Flames finally out, Ryoga rounded on Genma and prepared to pound him into the ground. No-one spoke to Hibiki Ryoga like that and got away with it. The ferociously strong youth was standing there with one fist cocked back, ready to strike, but Genma hardly moved. All he did was hold up a large plastic bag filled with nuts.

>"What's it going to be? Are you going to hit me, try to prove that you're better than the Senshi by attacking your trainer? Or are you going to practice? My boy learned it in just a few days. How long is it going to take you?"

>Snarling, Ryoga snatched the bag of nuts and threw some of them onto the fire. While he gazed into the heat and tried to think fast thoughts, he heard Genma prattle on behind him. "Speed is your weakness, Boy. You are too slow, and that is why the Senshi could defeat you. Practice this, and soon you will be able to avoid them like Ranma... And by the way, I'll be back every couple of hours to make that fire even bigger."

>As Genma lead his son (or daughter) away from the burning martial

artist, Ranma laughed. She could not remember the last time that she had laughed so much. Ryoga was just too slow to learn the technique. There was no way that he would ever be able to master the Amaguriken.

>"You know, Pops? Even if Ryoga does make it, it won't make him any faster on his feet. He'll still get hit just as easily."

>"I told you that your father was smarter than you are, Boy. Ryoga doesn't need that technique to punch faster, he can already hit fast and hard enough."

>"So why's he training?"

>"You'll see, Boy. You'll see."

>"And what do you want... You've got to be kidding!"

>Both Saotomes were looking at a setup in the back yard. In the corner was a strange contraption of tall pieces of wood with a pair of ropes hanging from them. One was just dangling, the other was holding a massive boulder. Although it looked fragile, Ranma was sure that his father made sure it was more than strong enough to survive the planned punishment.

>"What the hell are you thinking, Old Man? You don't know how to teach the Bakusai Tenketsu! Besides, even if you did, what good would it do me?"

>Leaning down so that his massive, blocky face was close to his child's, Genma looked at the fiery redhead. "So you think you know better than you're father now in how you should train?"

>"You betcha, I do!"

>With the speed of a man trained under Happosai, Genma reached out and gave Ranma a fast, hard poke in her left breast. "Hey! Quit it already! You've got no idea how much these things hurt!"

>Without a word, Genma turned and began pulling on the rope to lift the swinging boulder into position. Ranma only watched him for a short while before she was moving. She could vividly remember the first time that she had fought Ryoga after he had learned the Bakusai Tenketsu. The blasting point was not really the objective of learning the technique. The advantage came in the incredible toughening that it gave you.

>While she strapped herself into the hanging harness, Ranma grudgingly had to admit that her old man might be right this time. Her girl form was much weaker than her boy form. Even worse, she often got hit by water while she was patrolling. If she could train toughness into this body, she would be able to fight the Senshi on much more even terms.

>She might not know how to do the Bakusai Tenketsu, and her father did not know how to teach it. That did not matter, because she was Saotome Ranma, and there was nothing related to martial arts that she could not learn. She was smiling for almost five seconds before the boulder slammed into her for the first time. It was going to be a very long day.

>* * *

>Ukyo sighed. Nine out of ten times that something weird happened to her fiancée, there was no real positive side. This time she had to admit, his latest escapade with Happosai had honestly provided rewards. Not just a new martial arts technique for Ranma or beating a new foe, this time he had helped make someone's life better. To make things even more perfect, Ukyo had been there with him during most of the chaos, spending some quality time with her fiancé and helping sort things out.

>About two weeks and a half weeks ago, just before Ranma went training in the hills with his father, the poor boy had been dragged off to a seedy den of ill reputation by Happosai and his weak-willed

father. According to the two "adults" it had been to help toughen Ranma and make him a true man. From what Ukyo had seen of the event, it was simply that the perverts wanted to drag her fiance down to their level.

>Needless to say, things had not gone smoothly at the house of inequity. Ranma, being the water magnet that he was, had arrived as a girl, and the first time that anyone so much as touched him... By the time the dust had cleared, the house was a pile of rubble, and the hostesses were nowhere to be seen.

>That might have been the end of it were it not for fact that Happosai had ill advisedly chosen the residence and workplace for some members of Clan Kenzan. Kenzan was a clan of skilled ninja, with young Konatsu being their foremost student this generation. When Kenzan Konatsu had come to Nerima seeking revenge, Ukyo had teamed with Ranma.

>Like all battles that happened in the district, it was prolonged and more stunning than the last. It also seemed to follow one other unspoken rule about people who challenge Ranma: Konatsu was not what she seemed. On the outside, Konatsu was a quiet, polite girl of very traditional upbringing. Scratch the surface a little, and you found a ninja of sufficient skill to place both Ukyo and Ranma on the ropes. Naturally, Ukyo's beloved fiance had won, and it was at that point that the truth became clear.

>Konatsu was a boy.

>Raised by his evil step-sisters, the poor boy had been forced to pretend to be a girl his entire life. The Kenzan ninja were all girls, and thus when Konatsu's parents had given birth a boy, they had been ashamed and hid the fact.

>To throw fuel on the fire and enflame the confusion to new heights, Konatsu had become quite smitten by Ukyo. Homeless because their business and residence had been destroyed, Konatsu had prevailed upon the girl of his dreams. It was only after the soft-hearted Ukyo agreed to take him on as an assistant that she realised what a favour she had done.

>With his sisters, Konatsu had been oppressed and abused. Mocked for not being a real girl, Konatsu had been forced to do all of the drudge-work. Despite the fact that Ukyo only paid him a pittance, he worked himself incredibly hard, and still thought that it was an easy and luxurious life.

>Konatsu still dressed as a girl, and doted on every word that she said, but Ukyo would be the first to admit what a good employee he - or she - was. She did not really mind his gender insecurities. Ukyo had pretended to be a boy for the best part of a decade, and her beloved fiance changed sex with a splash of water. With examples like that, how could she be upset that Konatsu preferred to wear a kimono and makeup?

>The other telling reason to allow Konatsu to continue in his course was the fact that he really made a great girl. She had gained a noticeable increase in customer since the pretty waitress started. Konatsu had less business sense than God gifted the average gnat, but so long as Ukyo kept him away from business decisions, the cross-dressing boy was almost perfect. Best of all, it allowed Ukyo to take some time off every now and again. With someone like Konatsu able to set up the store for the evening rush, Ukyo was able to stay at school longer in the day. Better still, she could also afford to take some time off when it was needed.

>"Konatsu-chan? I've got head out for a while. Just watch the store and keep things going while I'm gone, OK?"

>"Yes, Ukyo-sama." The ninja gave a brief but deep bow.

>Picking up her delivery box, she hummed softly as she walked out of the store. A week ago she had gone over to visit Ranma, and had bumped into him as he set off to do some training. While she had wanted to go with him, looking after Konatsu and the store conspired against her. She did not feel too bad about the missed opportunity since only Ranma and his father were going. That meant that none of the other girls were making moves on her fiance, which was all that really mattered.

>The Monday after he had left, she had been worried that he might have gone off with the Tendos since neither Nabiki nor Akane were at school. Frightened that they might have been trying to trick her up, she had sneaked over the wall of their compound that evening for a look. Luck was on her side, because she spotted Nabiki in the main room, arm in a cast.

>She had considered going in and offering her sympathies, but Nabiki had never really been much of a friend. They were not enemies, more like business acquaintances. It was that business aspect of their relationship that caused Ukyo to keep her distance. She knew that if she had gone in, Nabiki would have someone managed to convince her to part with hard earned money, and since she was just taking on Konatsu, that was something she could not afford.

>Safe in the knowledge that Akane must have been staying home to help her sister, Ukyo had let life continue in a peaceful fashion. Without Ranma around, it was relaxing, possibly even dull. She had been willing to concede that Akane might have been staying home to help her sister, but when this Monday had rolled around and Ranma had not been at school, Ukyo began to be concerned. The thought that something serious had happened between Ranma and Akane was too horrible and unlikely to contemplate, but as the days passed, she had not been able to get the thought from her mind.

>That was why she was here now. Standing out the front of the Tendo compound, Ukyo took a quick sniff of the Okonomiyaki that she carried and smiled. Nothing wrong with a loyal fiancée bringing her man some food. Especially food that did not poison him or require medical attention after eating.

>"I'll just go in there, offer Ran-chan some food, then make sure he's not spending too much time with Akane. One taste of this, and he'll regret not coming and visiting me every day that he's been back."

>Indeed, with her new and improved super-special Ran-chan style Okonomiyaki, she would be capable of feeding two or three normal people. For her man, it would be an appetiser, to be followed up by dinner back at her restaurant.

>Pushing open the door, Ukyo walked inside the compound. Everything seemed perfectly normal, but there was an indefinable aura of gloom. Her experienced chef's nose could detect Kasumi preparing an early meal, and her keen fighter's ear could hear the sound of vigorous combat from the back yard. The harsh voices told her that it was Ryoga trying to kill Ranma again, so that was completely normal too. Failing to understand what could cause the feeling of depression, Ukyo ventured around the side of the house.

>The destruction that greeted her once she rounded the corner of the house was enough to make Ukyo drop the delivery box. Ranma and Ryoga were fighting with an intensity that she rarely saw, and skill that seemed to have grown noticeably in the weeks since she had last seen them. The fighters were not what caught her attention most, however. It was the silent statement provided by the destroyed dojo behind the pair that caught her eye.

>Akane was promised to Ranma so that they could continue the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts, and so that he could inherit the dojo.

Ukyo could not help but feel some elation at the sight of that same dojo in ruins. She knew how much a dojo meant to any martial artist, but to see one of the main strengths of her greatest rival lying in ruins, she could not help but drift off into a brief fantasy about her and Ranma celebrating their wedded bliss.

>Her contemplation of perfection was cut short when the fighters noticed her and headed her way mid-fight. Again she was caught off guard, since neither of them would usually cease fighting their enemy without an enormous motivator. She knew her cooking was good, but she did not think it was good enough to sway both Ranma and Ryoga from fighting. It was with a sigh of relief that she saw first Ranma then Ryoga continue trading blows over the takeout box. Mid battle, each boy grabbed a tasty dish and ate it, demonstrating coordination, skill and culinary aptitude beyond most mortals.

>With one hand on her battle spatula, Ukyo considered belting Ryoga. No-one picks on her fiancée without her permission, but she relented and slowly relaxed. She knew how much Ranma disliked it when she helped him in a fight. Besides, looking at how well he was doing, Ranma should be able to take Ryoga without causing her to worry too much.

>She was settling in to wait for Ranma's inevitable victory when his father walked out of the house. Despite the way that she glared at the man that had ruined her life, he ignored her and concentrated on the two combatants. "That's enough you two. Get some rest before this evening."

>Ukyo's jaw hit the floor when she saw both boys stop fighting almost mid-blow. One moment they were sincerely trying to do the maximum damage to each other, the next they were sitting down on the porch beside her, puffing and panting, all aggression forgotten.

>"Wh-What's going on here?"

>Ranma narrowed his brows and glared at an unoffending piece of dirt. "Training."

>"Training? What on earth are the two of you training for? Why are you training _together_"

>For the first time, Ranma turned and looked at her. With a slight grin, Ranma spoke. "Training for tonight. We're going out to kill some demons."

>"Demons! Ran-chan! You can't be serious! Those things are monsters! They'll kill you."

>The smile on his face was not the one she knew and loved. This was colder, harder, less forgiving. "Not tonight they won't. Ryoga and I have been training. Ain't no demon and ain't no Senshi gunna kill anyone while we're around."

>"D-demon? Senshi? What's going on here, Ran-chan? You're making me nervous."

>"Sorry, Ucchan. Things have been pretty rough for the last few days. It's good to see you, I guess."

>"Gee, thanks. You say that so sincerely."

>Ranma gave a short laugh. "Still the same old Ucchan. It's good to know some things don't change. Always stay like this, Ucchan. I want to remember you as someone happy and friendly."

>"What are you talking about, Ran-chan? Of course I'll never change. I'll always be your cute fiancée. But I don't understand. What does this have to do with demons and Senshi? They're a dangerous combination to mess with."

>She could feel Ryoga move beside her, but it was Ranma who spoke finally. "We're doing it for Akane. Every evening, Ryoga and me are going out and patrolling the city. We're gunna put an end to all the demons and Senshi if it's the last thing we do."

>After gaping several times in shock, Ukyo surged to her feet and pulled of her battle spatula. Swinging it around into a ready position, she glared at the two boys. "All right, that does it! Hitting you and poisoning you is one thing, but this will get you killed! Where is she? Where is Akane? If she thinks she can make you go out and fight all those monsters for her, she's got another thing coming."

>For several moments, Ranma looked like he wanted to say something, but then he just shook his head and went inside the house. Before Ukyo could follow him and start searching for Akane, Ryoga held up a hand and stopped her.

>"We're not doing it because Akane asked us to. We're doing it so that what happened to Akane never happens to anyone else."

>"What happened to Akane... I knew Nabiki had hurt her arm, but... Don't tell me she's in hospital! Is she OK? Why didn't someone tell me? She's my friend too."

>Grabbing small rocks from the ground at his feet, Ryoga clenched them in his fist, frustration and destruction the only outlets available for his pain. "She's not at the hospital. She... The Senshi killed her. Nabiki saw it all. They just shot her down so that they could get at a demon. They didn't even care..."

>Shocked beyond the capacity for speech, beyond rational thought, Ukyo collapsed to her knees and felt her mighty spatula fall from her suddenly limp fingers. "Dead?"

>It was not a question, more a self-denial. She couldn't be dead. Akane, the girl that was always being kidnapped and attacked, not her. They always joked about her that she was too much of a tomboy, too tough for her own good. Someone like that could not possibly die this young.

>Shaking slightly, Ukyo tried to bring herself back together. They may have been rivals, but they were never enemies. Ukyo could not possibly count the number of times that she had wished that Akane was out of the way and that Ranma could be hers, but she never wanted this. Not this way. Not dead. Despite what he said, Ukyo knew the reason Ranma had not chosen her long ago was that he cared for Akane and Shampoo. When he chose Ukyo, it would have hurt the other girls a lot; who would not be hurt by a rejection from someone as nice as Ranma? She knew Akane only distantly, as a friend in school and a competitor for Ranma's attentions. Poor Ranma must be devastated that she was gone.

>Ukyo had no real doubt that he would choose her. It had all been a matter of time until he realised that Akane was not right for him. But she would never have wanted it to end this way. This training and fighting easily explained why he was not at school. She wanted to rush off to him and console him, but she knew that he would not want that. She knew that Ranma was sensitive about these things, and would eventually leave Akane's family and move in with her. In the mean time, she would be here for him. She would show him all of the qualities that had made her the best choice for him for so long. A good fiancée stood by her man in his hour of need.

>"What can I do, Ryoga?"

>"Nothing!"

>It was a third voice, a voice of someone she had not expected. Genma had sneaked up behind her and had answered her question rather than the boy she asked, the boy who could give her a real answer.

>"I didn't ask you, you old fool! I asked Ryoga."

>Genma nodded and looked down at the shorter girl with long brown hair. Pushing his glasses up on his nose with one finger, he regarded

her serenely. "Could you beat either of these boys?"

>"What? No! I know I'm good, but no-one's as good as Ran-chan."

>"Indeed, but yet these two almost lost the first time that they fought the Senshi. Would you want them to be worrying about you the whole time? Do you want to be the one that distracts them when they most need to concentrate?"

>"No!" Ukyo hefted her battle spatula in an aggressive stance and threatened the big man. "You want me to show you just how good I am?"

>Genma gave a brief smile. "And who is it that trains Ranma? Who is it that sparred with him every day of his life? Who is the one man capable of defeating him?"

>"That's just because of your dirty tricks. You cheat! You'd never beat Ran-chan in a stand-up fight."

>"Anything Goes... I'm not sending more people out there to fight the demons just to see them killed. Martial Arts is not about fighting, it is about winning." Leaning in very closely, Genma put his face near hers. "The path of a true martial artist is fraught with peril, and the way is hard. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to train and be a real martial artist? Or do you want to go out there tonight, fight and die?"

>"I... I... I..."

>In a single smooth move, Genma used his close proximity to grab the spatula and pluck it from her arms at the same time as he flipped her onto her back.

>"If you would be so kind, Boy. Take her out the back and 'train' her for a while. Without the spatula. She needs the practice."

>"Why you... Give me that back!"

>Ryoga's coarse, blunt hand rested on her shoulder and stopped her before she could start to commit grievous bodily harm upon the elder Saotome. "He's right, Ukyo. He might be a lying, cheating, evil panda, but he knows tricks we haven't even thought of. Give us a few days, and you'll be ready to come with us."

>"Fight Ryoga for an hour, then I'll train you. We all want you out there." Watching Ranma's two friends walk out and prepare to train, Genma felt a short quiver inside himself. The creatures they faced were like no foe they had ever crossed before. There was no honour of martial artists or noble surrender. This was victory or death.

>Genma had been called many bad things in his life, and most of them were true. The one thing he could not be called was totally heartless. Almost totally heartless, yes; totally, no. Throughout his life, Genma had often risked his son's life in the cause of making him a better martial artist. Risking his life was not the same as throwing it away. The Cat-Fist had been the worst disaster, but even then Genma had easily been able to fix things to a safe level.

>He would never let his son be killed as long as there was breath in his body. Some people would say that meant that he should be out there battling the demons with Ranma, but he knew that he would be more of a liability than the Kuonji girl. Compared to his son he presented too easy a target, and he could not afford to be hit as much as Hibiki. That meant that he needed to be here, and he needed to do his best to keep his son and heir alive.

>If keeping Ranma alive entailed training each and everyone one of his friends in the lethal ways of Anything Goes, then that was what he would do. If it entailed sending good kids like Ukyo into battle against unholy monsters, he would do that too. In a year's time he

might never be able to look into a mirror and meet his own eyes ever again, but by all the Kami, he would still have a son then. No matter what it took.

>"Thinking, eh, Saotome-kun?"

>"Mmmm. Yes, Tendo. Thinking. There is much to think about."

>The tall man took a seat on the edge of the wooden porch where Ranma and Ryoga had been only minutes ago. When Genma sat next to him, Soun kept his eyes on the yard and concentrated on the martial artists there.

>"I remember a young man from many years ago, not much older than Ranma, he was. A great martial artist."

>"Hmmm. Maybe we should look for him. Would he be able to help?"

>"Maybe he could. Maybe not. I remember that this young man developed a whole new set of techniques. Techniques so powerful and deadly, he sealed them away forever. Swore never to use them again. Do you remember that young man, Genma my friend?"

>Giving a start, Genma looked across at his friend, but nothing was showing on Soun's face. "I do..."

>"What would it take for you to break that seal, old friend? My daughter is dead. Your son is fighting demons and magical warriors whose power is beyond imagining. What would it take for you to teach your son those techniques? Has your word become so strong and so honour bound that you cannot break it in this time of need?"

>Leaning forward, Genma rested his face in his palms. Muffled by his hands, the sound of his voice was still loud enough for Soun to hear. "I can't."

>"You can't or you won't? I know you're frightened of what they could do. I remember the stories of how they can even make the Old Woman's techniques seem pale. What would it take? What must happen before you can unseal the Saotome Forbidden Techniques."

>"It's can't. For two decades I have spent my every waking moment trying to forget the horror that I had created. If you could see what I see in my dreams, you would understand why I sealed them away and vowed never to use them again... But that is the problem, Tendo-kun. I succeeded. I sealed them away so well, even I cannot remember them."

>Sitting up, Genma looked out into the yard. Soun could see tears streaming down his face. "Every day I have been meditating, trying to remember them, but nothing is coming. Soun, my friend, you have to believe me. Every day now I wish that I had taught them to Ranma as soon as he was capable. Wish that I never let him leave Akane's side. If we had pushed them just that bit harder, said something just a bit better, they would have been married. Ranma would have been with her... He would have saved her. If I had not taken him on that accursed trip, Akane-chan would still be here."

>Wrapping an arm around the bigger man, Soun tried to comfort him. It was not Genma's fault that Akane had died, and what more could be asked of a girl's fiance than what Ranma was doing. Words would not come as easily or as clearly as he wanted, but Soun managed to convey his understanding. The Forbidden Techniques might contain power to exceed that of the Shi Shi Hokodan, but they must wait. Someday Saotome-kun would remember, and from that day forth, let all be wary of Saotome Ranma.

>* * *

>Rei was changing out of her school uniform and into her shrine robes when there was a soft scratching at the door. Knowing exactly who must be there, she opened the door and let Luna and Artemis in.

Despite Ami's protests that she needed to study, the Senshi had arranged to meet that afternoon straight after school, to prepare for a hard night ahead of them. It was unusual for the Moon Cats to desert their mistresses given the girls' tendency to get distracted, but Rei was quite happy to see them in advance of the meeting.

>"Hey, Luna, Artemis. Why are you here so early?"

>Both of the cats looked sheepish for a moment, but eventually Artemis gave Luna a nudge and the black cat stepped forward slightly and looked up at the trainee priestess. "Sailor Mars, please... We... We both dislike going behind the Princess' back to ask you this, but we have to know. What did the Negaverse do to Usagi-sama in your timeline?"

>"What? I don't understand. They attacked us all the time, but you said that you fought them all the time too."

>"That's not exactly what I meant. I need to know what they did to her."

>Rei looked even more confused for a moment before Artemis looked up at her with a piercing gaze and spoke gruffly. "What she means is: how did they break her mind? She's nothing like the Imperial Majesty that we used to know."

>"Artemis!" Luna sounded scandalised.

>"You think they did what to her?"

>Edging in just before Artemis, Luna tried to be a little more polite about their liege's possible trauma. "She's... She's not like the Moon Princess that we're used to. She's... Well, she flighty and vague and she has absolutely no sense of responsibility. Why, I had to ask her three times this morning to get out of bed! Two weeks ago, the Moon Princess would wake up every morning just to patrol the city for an hour before everyone else woke up."

>"She did?"

>Both cats nodded. "Not only that, but she was acting so strange at school, Haruna-sensei was very worried. If it was not for the fact that she had been such a serious and dedicated student recently, I'm sure the teacher would have thought Usagi-Sama was sleeping!"

>"No way!"

>"And what's worse, is that she... Well, I don't like to tell tales... She was climbing all over Princess Jupiter at lunch, trying to steal her food. Her Majesty would never do such a thing! She even managed to convince Sailor Mercury and Princess Venus to sneak out of school with her so that they could see Princess Jupiter. I have nothing against the Senshi working as a team, but this seems to be going to the extreme!"

>Finally Rei could hold it in no longer and collapsed onto her bed laughing. "You look so funny, Luna, the way you're so upset at Usagi-chan. She didn't even do anything wrong today!"

>"But... It's not natural! Her Majesty has always been such a sterling example to us all. True, it was a bit rough on poor Artemis, but Her Majesty tried so hard. Fighting the Negaverse with just the two of you helping her... It was such a trial for our princess. Ever since that first night I knew her, she has never once been afraid. Never once ran from a battle. Why, she is the most perfect example of what a queen should be."

>"Oh, Luna, you just don't understand. The way we remember it, you didn't recognise Usagi as the Moon Princess. That meant that the two of you were out fighting evil right from the start. Naru-chan survived. Usagi-chan had no reason to be serious all the time. She could rely on her friends. We were there for each other... All of us. There was none of this 'Princess Jupiter' or 'Princess Venus'. We

were all Sailor Senshi, and we were all ready to give our life for our princess."

>"But what happened?..."

>"We were a team. We were there for each other. The pretty soldiers who fought for love and justice were always on the same side. We even tried to trick the Negaverse into thinking we had split up, but they didn't fall for it. Even our enemies knew that we love her, and we would never abandon her."

>Standing up, Rei began to pace slightly, black hair flying behind her as she grew more animated in her speech. "We're a team because Usagi is that special person she needs to be. She might whine and cry all the time, but when you really need her, you can rely on her. She was there for us, and it was that special friendship that made Sailor Jupiter one of us, not some Princess Jupiter off fighting on her own. She might be a little cry-baby and not pay attention to anything, but we wouldn't change that for anything!"

>"A... cry-baby?..."

>Rei nodded.

>Luna looked stricken. "It... gets worse?..." The terror was plain in the cat's voice.

>Again Rei nodded. Her voice may have been serious, but the smile on her face made them hope it was a joke. "Just wait till she trips over in battle and starts crying."

>The cat's may have planned to continue their line of questioning, but the sound of the Moon Princess' delicate voice echoed up the stairs to Rei's room. "Rei! Are you going to be getting changed all day? I've almost finished one manga, and I need another one!"

>"Wah! Usagi! You're not supposed to steal my manga!" Leaving the cat, Rei raced down the stairs.

>Alone for a moment, Luna looked at her counterpart and enquired in a soft voice. "Do you think she was telling the truth?"

>"Sailor Mars has never lied before, and she seemed to believe what she said. I just find it hard to believe that this girl is the same as the Moon Princess that we worked with for so long. She's so different..."

>"Do you think that story about her crying in battle is true?"

>Entering the kitchen area where Rei was chasing Usagi around while the other girls watched in mirth, Artemis could only shudder. "I certainly hope she was exaggerating."

>Noticing everyone was in the room at last, Ami gave a delicate cough to try and gain their attention. With the spectacle that their leader was providing, it took Makoto's vocal support before people paid attention to the quiet girl.

>"I did some research today, I wanted to know more about the man and woman that attacked us yesterday."

>"Those creeps! My nose still hurts! What if they had ruined this perfect face? Millions of adoring fans would never get to know me."

>"I'm sure they'd still like you Mina-chan. We would... But aside from that, I think I might know why they attacked us..."

>Opening her bag, Ami drew forth a small pile of photocopied newspaper pages. Spreading them out on the dinner table, the collected Senshi saw a tale of destruction that left their mouths dry. Battles with Youma and the forces of the Dark Moon Family had always had an almost surgical precision to them in their past. People might have their energy drained, or sometimes a little damage would be done, but it was nothing severe.

>With only three Senshi on the team, things were more desperate. The

news clippings told stories of prolonged battles that only reluctantly yielded victory to the girls. While there had been no dangerously serious injuries, more than one civilian had left the battle zone with minor burns after Sailor Mars had been forced to burn them free from the Youma that had caught them.

>The same sorry story held true for Princess Jupiter. Unable to rely on the care and support of her friends, she had often resorted to attacking the monsters by herself. Again, she too had been forced to sacrifice precision for necessity, resulting in the occasional broken arm or leg for the people she saved.

>"Luna!" Usagi cried with tears beginning to form. "How could we do this? Why couldn't we all work on the one team?"

>"Usagi-sama, I'm sorry. I know you remember things working out better, but that's not how they really were. You worked hard, all of you. You did everything you could to defeat the Negaverse and to protect everyone in Tokyo... In the whole world even."

>"She's right," Artemis' gravely voice continued. "You'll never know just how happy it makes me to see all five of you in the same room and not be fighting... Well, except for Sailor Mars poking her tongue out at... Your Majesty! Please! It's not seemly for a woman of your importance to act like that."

>When the girls had calmed down, Artemis resumed his speech. "I can't say what it means to me to have Sailor Mercury sitting next to Princess Jupiter and not trying to strangle her while everyone else is busy arguing. But despite that, I don't care what it says in the news. No-one ever asked you to be perfect. No-one else ever came forth to fight the evil. You were all we had, and you were all that Tokyo needed. The Sailor Senshi will always be heroes in my book!"

>Amidst the cheers of support, Ami quietly reached into her bag and drew forth another pair of articles. Setting them on the table, she waited until the sober content had calmed everyone.

>"That might have been true, but things have gotten much worse. In the last two weeks, we've seen another group of Senshi start to operate, not to mention Prince Diamond and Black Lady helping Emerald. To make matters worse, we seem to have someone else entirely out there as well, and from what we can see, they want to kill people rather than just drain their energy."

>The newspaper articles showed a terrible truth. Although the Sailor Senshi had done a better job in the last week compared to what Tokyo had ever seen from them before, it was not good enough. The rogue Senshi - possibly the improperly summoned Outer Senshi - were almost as dangerous as their enemies.

>Finally things had turned ugly. Lives had been lost. People had been permanently injured. Families had been ruined by the magical catastrophes. "I don't know how they managed to hurt us so badly, but I'm beginning to get an idea why they did it."

>* * *

>"Come in Shampoo. I need you help with the dinner crowd."

>"Shampoo busy, Great Grandmother. Mousse help."

>Shampoo did not look around, but she heard the sound of a stick clicking on the ground behind her that announced the arrival of her guardian and mentor. "I commend your dedication to training, Shampoo, but I need your help now. Come inside and wash up. You smell like you've been here for hours."

>"Shampoo train all day. Shampoo no have time to work in restaurant."

>Cologne was used to Mousse talking back to her and occasionally refusing orders, but Shampoo always did what she was told

immediately. Her insubordination, even for something as important to an Amazon as training was something that Cologne needed to look into immediately.

>"Child... Cease your practice and look at me... I said, STOP!"

>After hearing that tone, Shampoo turned to look at her great grandmother. She was exhausted after a day of intensive training behind the restaurant, but she was not so tired that she missed the seriousness of the command. If she waited just a few moments longer, Shampoo knew that she would be feeling the hard end of the cane to remind her of her position.

>"Good. Now tell me. What is so important about training that you would suddenly decide that you would disobey the commands of your matriarch?"

>"Shampoo..." She was so used to thinking of Cologne as her great grandmother, it was easy to forget the rank that she also held. Theoretically, Cologne could order her expulsion from the tribe for disobedience. A legal technicality, but it helped remind Shampoo to keep things in perspective.

>"Shampoo shame self." She said, hanging her head. Shame was the inverse of honour, the other side of the same coin. If she had managed to conceal her actions from Cologne until she had righted things with Ranma, there would have been no problem. Now she had just told the one woman in the world whose opinion counted that she had done the unthinkable.

>Shampoo had expected some sort of reaction from Cologne. Condemnation, surprise, anything. Instead, all that happened was that she felt the tip of one of the old woman's wizened fingers under her chin, lifting her face so they saw eye to eye.

>"Tell me, Child. What happened? You did not lose a challenge against someone, did you?"

>"No! Shampoo never lose challenge. Except against Airen..."

>"Then what happened?"

>"Shampoo go to Airen place. Airen tell Shampoo Violent Tomboy was dead but Shampoo... Shampoo not think of Airen feelings. Shampoo so happy that Airen free, Airen get angry. Shampoo vow... Shampoo vow she show Airen she good wife by fight with him."

>"You think you shamed yourself and now you want to fight against him to prove yourself? Great Granddaughter, I do not wish to sound cruel, but you have not been putting enough effort into your training to beat Son-In-Law. Such a valuable addition to the tribe will be difficult for you to beat."

>"Grrrr. Shampoo hate Japanese. Language too too hard. Shampoo fight with Airen. Fight demons that killed Violent Pervert Girl. Shampoo make Airen love Shampoo again."

>Relaxing slightly, Cologne began hopping around the alley behind their restaurant that Shampoo had been using for training. There were training dummies, kicking and punching posts, even a few weapons that she could practice her forms with. Obviously Shampoo had been doing a thorough job of training herself. Not as good as if Shampoo had been trained by Cologne, but good nonetheless. Certainly nothing less than Cologne would have required of her protegee.

>"Ranma is as weak willed as any male. Properly led, he will forgive you of any words or actions you may have committed. Remember, Son-In-Law is also extremely forgiving. He will not judge you harshly under any circumstances."

>The purple haired girl looked quite uncertain. "Airen very not happy..."

>"Son-In-Law does not carry grudges. That was always the forte of the

Tendo girl. No, even if you did nothing, I am sure that he would forgive you within in days, a week at most."

>Before Shampoo could comment, Cologne held up one gnarled hand and silenced her impending interruption. "That does not mean that you do not have a good plan. If Son-In-Law is planning on fighting demons, then he will need all the help that he can get, no matter how good he is. While he does not bear grudges, he always remembers who his friends are. How far would he go for the girl that stood by him in all of the battles? That fought against the minions of all the hells by his side? Winning this city free of the terror that holds it will not be a quick battle. There will be much time that two fighters such as yourselves will be alone together."

>"Great Grandmother mean..." Shampoo began with hope in her voice.

>"I do indeed. I shall close the store for tonight and continue your training. Tomorrow, I shall speak to Son-In-Law and arrange for you to join him in his quest. No more shall be said of this 'shame' of yours. After a single battle, you shall be firm allies, and you can prove to him the true worth of an Amazon wife."

>"Great Grandmother... Thank you."

>"Do not thank me, Child. You will be the one doing all the hard work and facing the danger. A real Amazon could do no less."

>* * *

>Ranma had just awoken as Nabiki was walking out the door. Last night had been another challenge. He and Ryoga had not encountered the Senshi or either of the other magical girls that they knew. This time they had found a genuine demon. Well, maybe not a real demon, but it certainly seemed like one, and it fought like one.

>They had fought it to a standstill, and saved the family that it had been attacking, but they had not been able to destroy it before it escaped. Both of them were sad that they had not been able to have a perfect victory, but the fact that they had saved four innocent lives more than compensated for the bruises that were only just clearing.

>With bleary eyes, Ranma watched as Nabiki walked out the door holding a box in her good arm, and with a small backpack slung over her shoulder. Unable to think of any good reason why she would be heading out, especially since all of her 'contacts' called here during the day, he eventually opened his mouth.

>"Hey, Nabiki, where are you going?"

>"Out to earn some money."

>"Huh?"

>"You don't think things like computers and personal history searches are free, do you Saotome?"

>Ranma scratched his pigtail and idly wondered why he did not keep his mouth shut. If she was out to earn money, she would certainly be hitting on him for some soon. "Well, no... But I thought you had plenty..."

>"Oh, really? And what gave you that idea?"

>"Come on, Nabiki. Everyone knows you run the gambling at school, and you're always getting money out of me somehow."

>Nabiki snorted. "Kids' money. Even Kuno hardly supplies enough to keep us fed, let alone pay the rates and bills on this place. Looking after a group of fighters is not cheap, you know. I'm not even going to start on what you and your friends eat, but give a thought to this:"If you three are breaking bricks and smashing training dummies every day, how much is that going to cost? How much did all those bandages cost that you bled on? How much is it costing me to get people to do library searches and keep a lookout for suspicious activity?"

>"I...I...I don't know..."

>"Exactly!" Nabiki stated, biting off the word. "You don't know. It costs a lot. A hell of a lot. It costs more money than I have, and it certainly costs an awful lot more than your freeloading father brings in. Well... That's where I'm going now. I'm, going to run a little scam, and bring in some more of that money we need so badly, and that we go through so quickly."

>"I... I'm sorry, Nabiki. I didn't realise. Umm.... Just gimme a minute and I'll come with you."

>"Forget it, Saotome. You're no good as selling things, and you're even worse at trying to scam someone. Besides, you do what you can, and I'll do what I can. I know I can't fight as well as you, Ryoga or almost anyone else around here. But Akane was my sister. You'll never know what it was like, Ranma. You're an only child, but I was her big sister. I was the one that supposed to look after her, and see what happened. I can't bring Akane back, and I can't go out with you and save anyone else. What I can do, is bring in the money we need to keep fighting, and give you guys the information that you need to win."

>Shocked by the strength and emotion of her outburst, Ranma was silent. It was not until Nabiki had put on both her shoes and was struggling to pick up her box again that he moved. In a single fluid action he stepped into his soft, black, fighting slippers, scooped the pack off her back and lifted the box into one hand.

>"You're still hurt. If... If you don't want me around while you're working, I can understand that. I'll come back here and train with Ryoga and Pops. Might even help Ucchan train a bit. But just cause you're gunna be doing the selling is no reason I can't help you get your stuff there."

>Nodding once, Nabiki set off at a brisk pace. They took the train for a short while, since she needed somewhere not too nearby for her to hawk her wares. Most people in their area knew her by sight, so it was not really advisable for her to be doing anything underhand. When they finally disembarked, they were in Minato-ku, one of the suburbs of Tokyo that Nabiki had identified as being a hotspot of demonic activity.

>"So, Nabiki. What's in the box?"

>"Just bits of paper."

>"Huh?"

>Keeping her voice down, Nabiki leaned close to his ear and whispered. "Plain old paper. Last night I pulled out Kasumi's calligraphy set and spent a few hours doing some painting. This morning, I can say I've got over a thousand wards and charms to protect against demons!"

>"What? But you can't do that! You're not a priestess or nothing. How can your bits of paper keep anything away?"

>She gave him her most predatory smile. "They can't. But I do offer a 100% money back guarantee. If you get attacked in the first week, I refund your money. It's perfect. Even if they claim their money, so few people get attacked, it doesn't even matter. How much better can you get?"

>"But Nabiki! That's---"

>"Shhh!" She applied a finger to his lips. "That's why I don't want you here. Now, give me that box and go home. I'm an honest businesswoman, Ranma. If someone can prove to me that they were attacked while they had one of my wards, I tell them that something must be wrong with their ward and refund the money. What could be more honest than that?"

>"But---"

>"Go! Go, go, go. Go home and fight Ryoga for a while. I've got a lot of work to do."

>Reluctantly, Ranma turned away and began to walk down the street. He did not feel right in helping Nabiki con money out of innocent people, but she was always quite scrupulous in her financial dealings. She just made sure that people misinterpreted the facts of their own accord. As he was leaping to the top of the first building to begin his trip home, Ranma could hear her yelled words drift past his ears.

>"Come on, folks, come on. Get your wards here. We've got a money back guarantee on everything. Get attacked while our carrying one of our specialised wards, and we'll give you your money back! Come on folks! Protect yourself against the demons!"

>* * *

>Hotaru pushed the old blanket off herself and looked around. It was getting dark again. Inching closer into the protective shelter of the corner of the building, she shivered. Ever since it had gotten cold last night, she wished that she had taken the other magical girl up on her offer for help. Ranma-san had seemed so nice. She had saved Hotaru from those other two, but she still felt that she needed to refuse the offer.

>Not only had Ranma-san done so much for her by rescuing her from the big bullies that had been attacking her, she had also listened to her when she had needed to cry for a while. Hotaru wanted to trust Ranma-san, but she could not. When she was young, she had been taught how dangerous strangers can be. At school they taught you not to talk to strangers, and definitely do not go home with them. She had thought it was all right to talk to Ranma-san, but she was worried about getting any more help from her.

>It had been worse when Ranma-san refused to share her magical girl name with her. Hotaru was sure that normal people could not possibly be as fast or as strong as Ranma-san; she must be a magical girl. But she obviously did not want to share her secret with Hotaru. If she could not trust Hotaru with that, how could Hotaru trust Ranma-san? Especially since Hotaru had showed Ranma-san her own transformation. What else did she need to do?

>Giving a series of sneezes, Hotaru pulled the blanket around her shoulders again. Last night she had been so cold, sleeping outside. In the morning, she had managed to find a clean blanket that someone had thrown out, but even wearing it all day, she had felt cold. Now that it was turning to night again, she was shivering constantly.

>She did not know what she would do tomorrow, but she knew that she needed to find somewhere to live. The big problem with that was the fact that she only really knew two places she could stay: the school and her father's house. She had destroyed her father's house, and even if she had not, her father and Kaolinite would still be there, waiting to catch her and turn her into something evil. The school was out too, for almost exactly the same reasons; she might not have destroyed it, but if she stayed there, her father was sure to find out. If he found out, that would be the end of Hotaru, Silence Girl and her hopes of saving Tokyo from the fighting magical girls.

>Most children would have been able to turn to friends, but Hotaru did not have any of those. None of the other children at school liked her. The only person that she could think of that had been nice to her had been Ranma-san. She wished she knew where Ranma-san lived. Even if she could only stay there tonight, she would have begged if she needed to.

>Sneezing again and again, Hotaru shook beneath her blanket before

looking up at the sky. In the middle of a city, the building's lights tended to hide the stars. However, on this unusually clear evening, Hotaru had a perfect view of the moon. Hanging in the sky above her, she could almost feel it looking down on her and smiling, casting its protective gaze over her as she slept.

>She had not thought about the moon much before she became a magical girl, but now she often thought about it. Was it because it was so big and beautiful? Shining and full of hope, just like she was? Maybe it was just her mind trying to tell her something. She knew about Sailor Moon from the TV, everyone did. Maybe it was a clue from whoever gave her the magical powers. She would have to find Sailor Moon and make her stop fighting.

>Sailor Moon and every other magical girl in the city, demons too: everyone beware of Silence Girl. Tomorrow she was coming for you, and she was going to bring peace to her city, no matter what it took. Giving another shiver beneath her blanket, Hotaru finally found sleep, taking comfort in the thought of making Tokyo a place where everyone could be safe, happy and warm... especially warm.

>---
End Of Chapter

>
Author's Bit:

>
For those people who like to keep track of things, Konatsu is introduced in Volume 35, Issue 6. There could be many reasons why I have brought him forward. Maybe I like the character. Maybe I want to increase the numbers on Ranma's side. Maybe I wanted someone that just looks good in a kimono... Who knows? At any rate, Konatsu has appeared here as another of those minor changes that came about due to messing with time.

>

>End of Author's Bit <p><p>

5. Friendships Frozen In Time

> _____
 / \
> | Vengeance And A Half |
 \ _____/

>
Thanks to my pre-readers:

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>
What has happened:

>The time travel of Prince Diamond and the Inner Senshi at the end of Sailor Moon R has caused a paradox. Now the Outer Senshi are awake, the Death Busters are active, and the Dark Moon Family are still trying to conquer the world. In a desperate bid to stop a Daimon from gaining her Heart Crystal, the Outer Senshi were responsible for Akane's death. Now Nabiki and Genma are providing support for the growing team seeking to defeat the demons and the Senshi.

>Feeling beset from all sides, the Inner Senshi must contend not only with the violent Sailors Uranus and Neptune who are set against them. They face Ranma and Ryoga, the unknown and lethal quantity of Sailor

Saturn, the Death Busters and their Daimons, and the fact that Chibi-Usa is now Black Lady, one of the front line fighters for their dread enemy, the Dark Moon Kingdom.
>
Part 4: Friendships Frozen In Time

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>Sailor Uranus gave a short sharp nod. They had successfully concluded another defence of Tokyo against one of the Witches 5's Daimons. That in itself would have been sufficient to make her happy, but this afternoon's fight had been even better than usual. They had defeated the Daimon without a single serious injury to any of the civilians. No corpses littered the battlefield, and no body parts sat around, detached from their usual owners.

>This had been the sort of victory that she knew that she could be proud of once Sailor Uranus transformed back into Tenou Haruka. All too often it seemed that being Sailor Uranus called upon her to do things that she did not want to, deep within her heart. Saving the world was a terrible burden. Each time she went into battle Sailor Uranus knew that she needed to make the hard choices, to ensure that there would be a tomorrow worth fighting for. A tomorrow where humans and the Moon Kingdom ruled in peace.

>The high and noble thoughts of defending that peace was something that was able to protect Sailor Uranus' battle hardened soul. Used to fighting the forces of darkness for hundreds of years, Sailor Uranus was easily able to understand the need for sacrifice. What was one life, a hundred lives when compared to a world population of six billion? It was those billions of lives that mattered, not the individual, no matter how much it hurt her ordinary self.

>Defending the world was one thing that Sailor Uranus could do with a clear conscience, but there was another part of her personality that continually vied for control. These impulses were fought by everything that remained of the original Tenou Haruka once she transformed. Alluring, treasonous thoughts. Thoughts that were seductive and tempting, calling to her every moment of her life as a Sailor. Thoughts of Sailor Neptune.

>How simple it would be to cast aside Michiru. How beautiful to return to that intimate state with her one-time lover, Sailor Neptune. The chance to have someone to share the burden of guilt with, someone to plan with, someone to share the pain of their often Pyrrhic victories. Haruka knew that she could turn to Michiru and her beautiful friend would listen and understand anything that she said, but she did not want to do that. There was no way that Haruka could explain to Michiru that she was really a cold-blooded soldier, defending the world each evening. She could not share that blood on her hands with someone as innocent as Michiru. Instead, Haruka would suffer alone.

>Sailor Uranus desperately wanted to cling to the past and once again be with Sailor Neptune, but she fought the impulses. She would remain true to Michiru. That little piece of her soul and her virtue would remain untainted. No matter what actions she might be called upon to perform as Sailor Uranus, she would be able to look her lover in the eye and say with all her heart that she was the only one that mattered.

>While it was not unusual for the green haired Senshi to try to talk to her blonde counterpart after battle, normally the strong Senshi would depart as soon as the battle was over. This time, Uranus' ruminations had succeeded in holding her in place long enough for Neptune to get close. From this distance, there would be no way that Uranus would be able to get past her without resorting to force in

some fashion, and both girls knew that would never happen. Uranus might be denying her love with all her strength, but it remained strong nonetheless.

>"Sailor Uranus! We have to talk! Why do you keep running away from me?"

>Wracked with the bitterness of torn love and loyalties, Uranus' words came out sharper than she intended. "I'll fight together with you and that's all. Don't expect anything else from me."

>"C-Can't you feel it? Don't you remember what it used to be like?"

>"Of course I can feel it! I can feel it right to my bones every time I see you or hear your voice. I can feel this accursed love for you every moment of the day, and I don't want it."

>This had been the one true fear of Sailor Neptune. That Sailor Uranus did not remember anything of their life together in the Moon Kingdom. Neptune knew that she remembered everything she had been even after she transformed. For her, being attracted to another girl was not a world-shattering affair. Having learned that love can exist regardless of their physical shapes, Michiru had embraced the idea of resurrecting her love for Uranus.

>She knew that it would hurt Haruka horribly when they broke up, but it was better for everyone in the long run. Baring misadventure - which seemed quite likely at the moment - she and Uranus would live almost forever. Haruka... Haruka would grow old and die, fading like a flower while Michiru stayed forever young. It would be better for both of them if Michiru spared her that pain and allowed Haruka to find someone to love that she could have an ordinary life with.

>Now that she had finally managed to confront Uranus, all her hopes were ashes. Despite the fact that Uranus could remember their love, she obviously did not want it. Although Neptune had such high hopes, it seemed that probability had worked against her. The chance that the woman who had become Sailor Uranus was a lesbian was very low. Now it appeared that the thought of loving Sailor Neptune caused Uranus great distress, because the powerful Senshi was clenching and unclenching her fists while her strong shoulders shook in restrained emotion.

>Tentatively, Neptune took a step forwards. "Is... Is there someone else?"

>"You better believe there is! There is someone so perfect, so precious that I would never give her up. I would never abandon her for anything you could offer me. So just get out of my way and leave me alone. I'll be here when you need me to protect Tokyo, but that's all. Understand?"

>"No... Please..." Holding one hand forward, Neptune tried to stop her taller compatriot with words alone, but the Senshi in the deep blue skirt tossed her hair and looked away. As Uranus walked past, both their hearts tore, but neither stopped her.

>Uranus had just released the breath she had been holding when she felt a hand on her arm. She thought that she had managed to escape, but Sailor Neptune spun her around so that they were face-to-face. Standing close, so close that she could see Neptune's deep breaths cause her bow to rise and fall, Uranus felt her resolve weaken. Fixing an image of Michiru in her mind and a scowl on her face, Uranus glared at the girl in green and white.

>"You just don't listen, do you?"

>With a determined look on her face, Neptune took another step closer. "I can't let it end like this. I have to try!"

>With that, she threw herself at the larger girl, wrapping her thin,

strong arms around the body she knew so well in her memories. Lips met warmly, and Neptune fell into unparalleled bliss as her kiss was returned with full vigour.

>Only minutes passed before they separated, but to the two lovers it was an eternity of perfection. All that existed in the world was each other; the touch, the taste, the smell. After thousands of years of being apart by the ultimate finality of death, they had bridged the gap and been reunited. No thoughts were spared for anything but the person they each held. Other loves, other hates, petty things such as saving the world were all washed aside by the tidal wave of emotion and pleasure that they rode.

>Gasping for breath, drained by the pleasure of renewed contact, they broke slightly. Still they held each other like a drowning sailor clutches a life preserver, but now they had enough room to look at the other's face and smile as they drew in the breath of life, flavoured by the lingering taste of someone else's mouth.

>The slightest of frowns flicked across the tall Senshi's face. Running her tongue across her lips once, she looked down slightly.

"M-Michiru?"

>"H-Haruka?"

>This time when they dived back into each other, there was no doubt. They each knew that no-one felt or acted quite the same as the one they knew so well. No-one else carried all of the indefinable qualities that makes you love someone. Even without words, they answered each other and knew that there really must be a god that watched over all things and made sure that there really was justice in the universe.

>Each woman was willing to do everything necessary to save the world. They would sacrifice themselves, their pride, and their very humanity. The one thing they balked at was their love, and they had just found that all their fears were ungrounded. The one they loved now, and the one they had been destined to love from their past live were one and the same. Perfection had never tasted so sweet nor been so warm when held tightly against yourself.

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>The sun was directly overhead as Cologne pogo-ed through the entrance to the Tendo's yard. She had spent the morning with Shampoo, training the girl until she dropped. Mousse was no better, having fallen over from constant use as a training dummy. Cologne shook her head and decided that there was no point in understanding a mere man. Why on earth he thought it was such a great honour that Shampoo said she needed a target to practice on, and wanted him, she could not understand.

>Leaving Shampoo to rest and Mousse to heal, Cologne had headed for her next task of the day. It had always fallen to the matriarchs of the tribe to ensure things ran smoothly, and this was no exception. She knew that she could talk rings around Ranma and convince him the sky was red if she wanted to, but this was a different matter. This was matter of the heart, a matter of family. Her Son-In-Law's honour was his strongest characteristic, and if he felt that it had been slighted by whatever Shampoo had said, her granddaughter might be in for some difficulty.

>On the other hand, if he did not think that, then there would be little or no difficulty setting things up so that her charge could get her man. Ranma was as much a man as any other she knew; weak willed and unable to think clearly when presented with a pretty girl. When she combined that with his generous nature, she would have no trouble getting Shampoo added to his quest.

>Not hearing any sounds of training, Cologne moved around to the back of the house, then walked through the seldom used gate for

challengers. It was not that she was afraid of being found; it was simply that her task would be easier if she could get Ranma by himself and badger him into a decision before someone with more wits about them stepped in.

>Since her nose told her that Kasumi did not have lunch ready yet, and there was no-one fighting, that left two places he would likely be. Either the bath, or his bedroom. She considered dropping by the bath first and checking, but she remembered a report Shampoo some time ago where she had said that Ranma clammed up at the sight of a pretty girl in the bath with him. If he acted that way about Shampoo, then he would surely be able to do no less for someone as attractive and youthful looking as her.

>Brushing her long hair out of her face and smiling at the thought of Ranma blushing in front of her, she decided to skip the bath. It would be best to keep him at ease. To put things on a relaxed footing. Maybe she could catch him while he was having a nap.

>After a moment's hesitation to allow Kasumi to return to the kitchen, Cologne dashed through the living room and up the stairs to the bedroom. Although she had hoped to find him asleep, seeing him come out of his bedroom was almost as good. As long as he did not get any good advice from Nabiki, he should be fairly malleable.

>"Hey, Old Ghoul. What are you here for?"

>"Just to talk, Son-In-Law. Just to talk."

>Closing the screen door behind him, Ranma advance toward Cologne. For a moment she feared that he was far angrier than he looked, but she could not sense any hostility in his aura or his movements. When he began to walk past her, she turned and watched silently.

>"What do you want to talk about, Old Ghoul? I've got a lot of training to get done, and I ain't got time to stand around waiting all day."

>Well, his manners had not improved at all, she noted as she bopped him on the head with her staff. "I just thought I might speak to you while you are still alive. If you are going out to fight demons and I can still hit you that easily, I had better start putting away money for flowers to put on your grave."

>A strange light came into Ranma's eyes, and the side of his mouth curled into a grin. Looking more determined and less humorous than he normally did, Ranma jumped down to the bottom of the stairs and beckoned to the ancient Amazon. "Now that almost sounds like a challenge. You wanna come down here and give me a bit of practice?"

>Cologne could not resist giving a brief, delicate laugh as she descended the stairs. More accurately, she thought it was delicate, to anyone else in hearing range, it was a spine chilling cackle that made hairs stand up all over your body. Once she was in the living room, she leaned forwards slightly and beckoned him.

>"Please, Son-In-Law. I look forward to seeing how much you have learned since we last played together."

>Ranma gave her a glare and rolled his eyes. "Not in here, Ghoul. Outside. Do you have any idea how much it costs Nabiki to repair this place?"

>"Of course. I simply had no idea that you either knew or cared."

>"Um... Actually I don't know. It's just we're trying to save some money so we can figure out where the demons are." Outside on the grass, Ranma clenched a fist and stared at it with frightening intensity. "Any other day, Old Ghoul, I wouldn't care. But Nabiki

says it's the only way we can find the people who killed Akane. For that... For that I'd do anything."

>Cologne kept her face calm, but inside she was grinning from ear to ear. If she had written a script for him to forgive Shampoo, it would not have gone any smoother than it was now. Joining him on the grass, she pointed the thin end of her stick in his general direction. "Well then... Let's see if there is any point in her hard work."

>With that, she leapt. Lunging forwards with her staff, Cologne rapidly began to hear the familiar ripping sound of her cane rapidly displacing air. One of her oldest tricks, she knew that her Son-In-Law would be able to beat it, but it motivated him to move.

>Move he did, with a speed that she had only seen him use when female. Bouncing over one set of strikes, he landed closer to her then proceeded to do the limbo under another line of attacks. Before she considered possible, he was lashing out, trying to trip her with a leg strike. Concentrating on her own inner strength, Cologne let the freedom and glory of fighting grasp her, and was quickly moving past the boy, aiming for a strike to his back.

>Again she was surprised when she missed. He might not have been fast enough to turn and dodge her, but he had improved. Acting on the instinct that promised to make him truly great one day, Ranma had flexed his back, while he simultaneously moved and retaliated. She hopped several times until she was standing on one of the rocks boarding the Koi pond. Once there, she proceeded to take his measure, swapping blows and blocks at the best rate he could manage.

>This time she let her smile reach her face, and the pleasure was completely unfeigned. The boy's father may have been an idiot, but he had done amazing things with the lad. Although Cologne liked to take much of the credit for his improvement in recent months, there could be no doubt that Ranma had excelled without her. He was not capable of beating her yet, but she could feel that time approaching faster every day.

>Nothing brought out the best in Shampoo's husband like a challenge, and judging by how much he had improved in such a short time, the challenge must be nothing short of inhuman. Already he was faster, stronger and seemed to pay less attention to her blows than just a few weeks ago. How could she possibly let someone this fine fail to improve her tribe's gene-pool?

>Before fatigue had a chance to set in, Cologne manoeuvred herself to dump him in the pond. If she had been pleasantly surprised before, she was delighted now. In an attempt to end the training quickly, she had honestly tried to tip him in the water. Without holding back, and without making things easy for him, she had sincerely tried. What made her smile was the fact that he managed to block her. Only once, but he had definitely taken the first step to that time when he was the superior fighter. True, she got him on the second time, but it was a significant step forwards.

>Coughing and spluttering, the cute red-head sat up in the pond and glared at her. "What did you do that for? Now I'm all wet!"

>"Ha! You talk about taking on the Sailor Senshi and their monstrous adversaries, but one frail old woman can beat you. How sad."

>Shaking her small fist, Ranma did not look at all threatening, but Cologne too was proof that looks not only can be deceiving, but often are. "You want to try that again? This time it'll be you taking a swim!"

>Cologne hopped backwards several paces to avoid the water that was being splashed around. Closing her eyes and placing a concerned mask on her face, she waited a few moments for Ranma to calm. Once the red-head had hoisted herself out of the pond and was wringing her shirt out, Cologne opened her eyes again and looked at her future relative through thinly opened lids.

>"You are good, Son-In-Law. But you are not good enough. By yourself, you have no hope."

>"Feh. Doesn't matter. I could beat them myself if I needed to, but I don't. With Ryoga around, the two of us can take care of anything."

>Leaning forwards, Cologne placed herself just millimetres from Ranma's face, much to the girl's disquiet. "Then if you have the Hibiki boy with you, surely you would not object to my Shampoo joining you?"

>For a moment, Ranma's face clouded, but almost as quickly it cleared. "So long as she don't say nothing about Akane. Sure, the offer still stands."

>"The... Offer?..."

>Now it was Ranma's turn to look confused. "Yeah, she came over the other day. I guess I got a bit upset cause of what she said about Akane, but I can remember I asked her to help fight too."

>"You did?"

>"Sure! It's not as though she's as good as I am, but I know she can look after herself. I told her the next time I saw her, I hoped she was fighting beside me. Or something like that..."

>"I see... Perhaps I should go and tell Shampoo. She seems to have misunderstood what you said."

>Ranma shrugged. "Ahh, it can happen to anybody. I was upset, she probably got confused or something. Besides, you know me, Old Ghoul. It ain't like it's easy to make me mad at you."

>Nodding her head, Cologne decided to accept his statement at face value and not try to make his view of events match up with Shampoo's. She knew that her great granddaughter was not as astute an observer as she was, but it was not like Shampoo to confuse the situation that grossly. Perhaps if Ranma had been that upset, he truly did not remember what he had said in anger.

>"Very well then. I shall send her over as soon as she completes today's training. Good day, Son-In-Law."

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>Kaio Michiru, otherwise known as the elegant Sailor Neptune, looked at the spill of short blonde hair that covered the head next to her. She had a hard time accepting just how close she had come to losing everything. If she had broken off with Haruka before she had made peace with Sailor Uranus, who knows where things would have been now?

>Her delicate eyebrows drew together slightly in an unusual display of concern as she slowly reached across and gently ran a knuckle along her partner's cheek, collecting the moisture there. "I'm sorry, Haruka. I... I could remember what we had together before, and I wanted it back so badly. Can you forgive me for wanting Sailor Uranus so much? I never wanted to make you cry."

>Haruka took the hand and gently kissed it. "It's not that. I wanted you just as much. It's just... I hurt so much. Inside. Every time I go out there as Sailor Uranus, someone gets hurt or killed. I don't know how I can keep doing it."

>"You can do it for the same reason I can. Because we have to. I we don't stop the Death Busters from gathering the Heart Crystals and whatever they are looking for in them, who will? We're the only ones that can keep everyone safe."

>Haruka turned around and grabbed Michiru in a tight hug, burying her head in her lover's shoulder. For long moments, she just sat there, her strong body heaving with the shudders of her sobbing. Michiru held her tightly, letting the girl know that she was there, but waiting until Haruka was ready to speak. Eventually her patience paid off, as Haruka took several deep breaths and spoke again.

>"I hate it."

>"What? What do you hate, Haruka?"

>"I hate the Sailor Senshi. I hate the Death Busters, I hate the Inners, and most of all I hate Sailor Uranus. I wish I'd never gotten the power. I wish I was just the same girl you knew a month ago. I wish we both we. We were so happy then. Why did this have to happen to us? Gods, I hate all this fighting."

>"Shhh... It's OK. I'm here with you, and you'll never be alone again. I'll be with you. Whenever you need me, I'll be with you in a fight. Come on, Haruka. You do a great job as Sailor Uranus. No-one else could possibly do what you do. Every time I go into battle, my knees are knocking and I feel so scared, but you bring me through. All I need to do is look at you and I know that I have nothing to worry about, even when we were fighting Sailor Saturn I knew you could bring us through. You've so calm and magnificent. I know you're the one with all the strength to get the job done."

>"How do you do it, Michiru? How do you find the strength to do what we need to? Whenever I'm Sailor Uranus, it's so easy. So easy to look at the bigger picture and understand the sacrifices that have to be made for the greater good. But afterwards... I can see their faces, Michiru. They're all watching me, saying 'Have you saved the world yet? Was my sacrifice necessary?'"

>"I can do it because you're there for me, Haruka. When we're in battle, you always seem to know exactly the right decisions to make, as though you had done it a thousand times before. Maybe... Maybe afterwards, I can be there for you. You don't have to carry everything by yourself. We're a team now. Nothing can pull apart Neptune and Uranus."

>There was silence for a while, and Michiru luxuriated in the feeling of another's heart beating so close to her own. After Haruka had composed herself, she pulled back from the other girl slightly, but still held her tightly, like a woman clutching the last handhold at the edge of a precipice.

>"Will we always be a team?"

>"Always. We found our way back together after being dead for thousands of years. Nothing can keep us apart. Together we will keep the Moon Kingdom safe, just like we did in the old days."

>Haruka snorted. "It's dead. The Kingdom is gone, the Queen is dead. It's all over."

>"No! That's not true. What about the Inner Senshi? We know they're alive. You just need to look in the newspaper to hear about them."

>"You're wrong. The Inners might be back, but the Queen is still dead, and the Kingdom is no more. Look at them, read about it. It's all there, stretching back for months. There is no 'Inner Senshi' any more. That team is gone. They're all calling themselves Princess This or Princess That. Moon Kingdom? Hah! They've carved it up into their own little playrooms."

>"No, that can't be true. Remember the other day? We saw them when we attacked Black Lady, they..." Michiru trailed off. That was probably the worst example of team effort she could have picked in the whole world. What could she say? 'We saw them work together when they ganged up against us to let one of the Kingdom's enemies escape.'

That would have done so much to support her argument.

>Then again, that was the only time they had seen the Inners work as a team. The rest of the time they had needed to rely on the newspapers, the same as anyone else. Considering the danger of the Senshi's enemies currently, it took a particularly brave or foolhardy reporter to stick around and do a story on the magical girls. That meant that the best information they had was that the Inner Senshi were a fragmented joke, fighting each other as much as they fought their enemies, like rabid dogs fighting over dinner table scraps. The Earth might not be much compared to the might the of the Moon Kingdom at its peak, but it was all they had.

>"They fought against us as a team, if you remember." Michiru nodded, indicating her recollection of Haruka's statement. "Do you remember what the papers said about them fighting together?"

>"Not really, I only skimmed a few articles. Something about the fact that they did not do it often."

>This time Haruka nodded. "Not just that. They also only did it against their worst enemies; the strongest of foes. What does that say about us?"

>"But... But we're Sailor Senshi too! We can't be their enemies! We're trying to protect the Moon Kingdom and everyone on Earth."

>"But yet they still attacked us. They attacked us so that someone who wants to conquer the world could escape."

>The girl with the green hair was silent, stunned mute by the implications of what had been said. "They did... They would rather turn on their fellow Senshi than allow a deadly and powerful threat to the world to be neutralised."

>Neither spoke for a long time. Minutes ticked by on the old clock opposite the couch. As the long hand swung past another numeral, Michiru finally spoke.

>"Are they really the Inner Senshi anymore? I know that when we got our memories back, there are bits missing. I can still feel it. There's so much I can remember, but then there are these blank bits, as though someone stole a page out of a book, the memories just stop so suddenly. I remember the royal ball... I remember a royal ball. I can't remember when it was, or why we were there, or even who the guests were. It's disturbing."

>"Do you think that the Inners might have forgotten who they were? That their allegiance to the Queen is gone?"

>Michiru nodded. "It must be. If Queen Serenity was alive again today, would she tolerate what has happened? Could she possibly have let the Inners, her Senshi, go wild like they have?"

>"No. It's gone. The Moon Kingdom is dead. Queen Serenity is dead. Everything we fought for is gone. We're all that remains. We are the only ones that understand how great things were, what a paradise could be... We're the only ones that can fight to get it back again."

>"You're right. Maybe that's our really duty. Not just to save the world, but to bring it something better. To bring the Moon Kingdom back. To... To find a new Queen Serenity. Someone capable for fighting for her people. Capable of loving them the way she did."

>It was a sobering thought. Not exactly regicide, since the Queen was dead, and certainly not treason since they were acting for the good of the Kingdom and everyone in the world. After thinking on it, Michiru looked up at Haruka to see her equally deep in thought.

>"Can we do it?"

>"Do we have any choice? We've got three self appointed Princesses

running around, and evil pouring out of every crevice in Tokyo. They might be doing their best to loot the corpse of the Kingdom, but that's no reason we have to let them get away with it.
"I know you, Sailor Neptune. You and I, we can do it together, because we have to. We might be the only people on the whole planet with the power and the determination to get the job done. Together, we'll clean this city of the evil infesting it, we'll get rid of the usurpers, and we'll find a new Queen of the Moon Kingdom."

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There was a short chuckle before Michiru replied. "And what shall we do after lunch, dear?"

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"I'm serious."

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"I know you are. We always talk about needing to make scarifies to save the world, well, this is one sacrifice we can make by ourselves. No-one will thank us, maybe not for hundreds of years. No-one will appreciate what we are doing, but we'll do it anyway, because it's what needs to be done. Only..."

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"Only, who will be the new Queen Serenity?" Haruka finished the sentence. "I wish I knew. We can't. We're soldiers. I... I don't think we could sit in a throne and decide the things Serenity used to. I... I really don't know who could fill her shoes."

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"But we'll start anyway. Well get rid of the Death Busters. Get rid of the Dark Moon Family, and get rid of those interfering, childish Inner Senshi. We'll do it because we have to. No matter what the cost."

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"No matter what the cost."

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"Nabiki!" Kasumi called up the stairs to her sister. "Ranma's not out in the yard. Can you see if he's in his room? It's time for lunch."

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Levering herself off her bed, Nabiki rubbed her face, feeling stiff and dirty. She had been home for about twenty minutes, and had wanted to get a quick nap before lunch and heading out again. It was too dangerous to try and sell her wares at night, so that meant she needed to take advantage of the daylight and do her selling then.

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She knew that she should still be out there, selling her fake charms and wards to the lunch crowds, but at the moment, she could not face it. Less than two weeks since her sister's death, she was still suffering from her broken arm, and every night recently had been a late one as she waited for her avenging heroes to return home, safe and sound. Even just the exertion of calling out to customers and parting the losers from their money had drained her.

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That was the real reason she had come home for a long lunch break. She knew she needed the rest. A month ago, making money was the be-all and end-all of her existence. Simply making money was the end, not the means. If she had thought of a scam like this a month before, she would have taken to the job with a spring in her step and a laugh in her voice. Now it was a job, and it wore at her in ways she never expected, and still could not understand.

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The hardship of earning money to support their private rebellion against evil was something she was more than content to suffer. From what Kasumi told her, she would shortly be feeding six or more hungry martial artists, not to mention keeping them outfitted in medical and training supplies. That sort of money quickly added up, and if she wanted to keep her network of informants and 'allies' active, it would need regular greasing also.

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All of that meant that she should have been out selling wards to gullible salary men, but she could not face the lunch-time crowds at the moment. All she wanted was a short nap to make up for lost sleep,

and some of her sister's delicious cooking. Planting her feet on the floor she inhaled deeply and braced herself on the edge of her bed. She was supposed to be the strong one, the one in charge, the one that could handle her emotions, and thinking of something as trivial as cooking almost sent her into a crying fit?

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Akane had always been so... determined... when it came to cooking. Nabiki could not count the number of times she had run out of the house in fear, leaving Ranma to suffer Akane's ministrations. How is it possible that a cool, collected business-woman like her could be almost reduced to tears by something as simple as this? She needed to focus... Focus on doing what needed to be done, on doing everything she could to support Ranma, Ryoga and any one of their friends that might possibly turn up.

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Clenching her fist, Nabiki frowned in determination. Let them raise an army! She did not know how, but she would find a way to support it. She would get them whatever they needed, and she would be there for them. She might not have been able to protect Akane like any good sister could have done, but she would look out for the rest of her family, and anyone else she could. Only time would show that they were doing the right thing, but Nabiki knew that time was a resource they had very little of.

>
But as they said, time was money. If she could provide the money, they could cut the time they needed for so many things. Better information, radios so they could stay in contact, training, reinforcements, any of a million things. Knowledge was power, and it was one power that Nabiki wielded with a level of skill that rivalled Ranma's skill in martial arts. She could... She would do her part in getting the justice her sister deserved.

>
Having taken more time to pull herself together than she would have liked, Nabiki began to move. Stomping her feet slightly as she put on her slippers, she subtly let her big sister know that she was up and moving. Sure that Kasumi would be calling out a reminder to her any minute now, Nabiki rapidly made her way to Ranma's room.

>
Without bothering to knock - what did he have to hide that she had not seen (or photographed) before - she pulled open the door to his room. It was quite obvious that Ranma was not there immediately, but she studied his futon bed for several long moments before slowly pulling the door closed and heading down stairs. There was always something about Ranma that kept her thinking. Even when he was not around, events seemed to follow him and cause confusion.

>
Once she reached the ground floor, she noticed that Ranma was already seated at the table, along with his father, Ryoga and Kasumi. Her father was already finished. He had not been eating much recently, and after his meals he had recently been going out to their back room where they kept the shrines to both Akane and their mother. Her father would say a few quick words to them in private, then continue with the gardening or whatever physical activity caught his attention that day.

>
On the outside, Tendo Soun looked like he was coping better with Akane's death than with their mother's, but his behaviour worried Nabiki. Sometimes, the things you cannot see are the most important ones. Where were the tears, the grief, the sobbing? She knew her father was no longer a healthy man, but she could not deal with that problem as well at the moment. Ranma first, demons second. Then she could worry about her father. He would survive that long with just Kasumi's help. At least, she hoped he could.

>
"Oh, I'm sorry, Nabiki. When Ranma came inside, and I hadn't heard anything from you in so long, I assumed you wanted to keep sleeping. I'm sorry we started without you."

>
Nabiki nodded once and sat down opposite the cute red-head.
"Having water problems again, Ranma-chan?"
>
"Stupid Pop's fault. Stupid Old Man's got some sorta idea about teaching me the Bakusai Tenketsu." The girl rolled her left shoulder once in an exaggerated movement. "Damn, that still hurts."

>
"But, Saotome-san... You don't know how to teach the Bakusai Tenketsu... Do you?"
>
Genma pushed his glasses up on his face and gave Kasumi a proud look. "Ahh, again you underestimate me. Over the years, I have taught Ranma a vast number of techniques that I had no sound knowledge of. Under my guidance, Ranma cannot fail to master the dreaded exploding point technique! Ahh, the ancient and wondrous techniques I have taught him."
>
"Like the Neko-Ken?" Nabiki enquired archly.
>
"Yes, exactly like the N... Well, maybe not quite like that, but similar in many respects."
>
Giving a low moan, Ranma slumped onto the table and covered her head with her arms. "Ohh... I can just see it now. A week from today, I'll have a terrible fear of boulders, and whenever I encounter one, I'm gunna think I'm a rock!"
>
Genma scratched his chin, suddenly deep in thought. "Hmmm... The dreaded Boulder-Ken. Yes, Boy. Now that you mention it, there is another technique I want to---"
>
"No way! Ain't now way I'm tryin' any more of your dumb ideas!"

>
"Just a thought! Just a thought!... We can always try it later, when you remember how to respect your father..."
>
Ranma just grunted at that, deciding that the best way to end the issue was just to ignore her father. 'Boulder-Ken? How bad could his stupid names get? Next he would be calling his attacks things like World Shaking or Mountain Of A Thousand Fists. Something corny like that.'
>
After a moment's quiet to digest the recent conversation, everyone resumed eating. Everyone, that is, aside from Nabiki. She calmly watched Ranma for a moment, biding her time as the girl shovelled food into the insatiable opening she called a mouth. It was only as Ranma's hand reached for her cup of green tea that Nabiki spoke.
>
"Ranma-kun. I do have one little question for you..." Ranma gave a questioning grunt and looked at the older girl over the edge of her teacup. "Who's the strange girl in your bed?"
>
"Blarrg!" Tea sprayed everywhere, and most especially over Ranma's father, who had predictably tried to take advantage of Ranma's distraction to lean in and grab some food. "You what?!"

>
"Not me, Ranma-kun. You. I might just be able to understand it if you had Ukyo there, she might have been hurt in training. But this is someone completely new. Care to explain?"
>
"Oh, that's just... Um... Oh, damn! I can't remember her name. Gimme a second, I should have gotten her for lunch."
>
Putting action to words, Ranma was up and out of the room before anyone other Nabiki had recovered from their surprise. After a moment, the smirking Nabiki felt a slight tug on the corner of her sleeve and turned to find herself facing a concerned Kasumi.

>
"You don't really think he brought home a girl for that, do you? I... I thought, Ranma-kun..."
>
"It's OK, Kasumi. When I saw her before, she looked way to young for Ranma to be interested in her. My guess is that she was probably

a victim of a demon attack or something. You know how obsessive he's been getting. If you combine that with the way he's always looking out for people, I'm amazed he hasn't rebuilt the dojo into a military academy for demon hunters and their victims. I'm sure he could make a fortune at it if he did it right."

>
Any further comment by Kasumi was forestalled by Ranma's return. In her arms she carried quite a small girl, barely a teenager, if that. The girl, although awake, still looked very tired, and was unusually pale. Kneeling down beside the table, Ranma gently set the girl on the floor and started bringing over a plate and piling food onto it.

>
"Come on, this is why you were so sick. You've gotta eat right, otherwise you'll never grow up to be big and strong like me."

>
"Yes, Ranma-san, but..." There was a definite tone of admiration in the voice that was obvious to anyone who was more observant than the Koi outside. This meant that neither Ranma nor her father noticed the way the little girl looked at the red-head, nor did they hear the worshipful tone in her voice. Ryoga ignored it. It was simply another sad case of a poor girl smitten by Saotome's womanising charms. Kasumi spotted it, and thought how nice it was that the younger generation was still so respectful, even to someone uncouth like Ranma. It was very nice the way the little girl managed to show her appreciation for the efforts made on her part.

>
Nabiki, on the other hand, immediately became suspicious. There had to be something much more to this than they had already figured out. She knew that Ranma was good, and quite awe inspiring in her martial arts, but she also knew that Ranma would quickly undo any good impression as soon as she had opened her mouth. To have someone still looking up to Ranma this way meant that they could not have had any sort of significant conversation yet. This in turn lead to the conclusion that Ranma must have brought the girl home while she was either asleep, or - judging by her pallor - while she was too sick to talk. If that was the case, why had Ranma brought her here rather than to a hospital?

>
Seeing Ranma hovering over the small girl, having loaded the plate with as much food as Genma would usually eat, Nabiki decided it was time to get the answers that she needed. "So, going to introduce us to your friend?"

>
Giving a guilty start, Ranma rounded on the rest of the family, as though she had only just realised that they were there. Grinning sheepishly, Ranma scratched the back of her head and gave a nervous chuckle. "Ahh... Heh, heh, heh. Um, this is Nabiki, Kasumi, Ryoga, and that's Pop. Gotta be nice to Kasumi, she's the one that made all this great food."

>
Kasumi beamed, especially when their guest swallowed her mouthful and gave a big smile. "It's very nice, thank you, Kasumi-san."

>
"It's my pleasure, Little One."

>
There was silence for a few heartbeats. "I was actually more interested in knowing her name, Ranma."

>
"Oh... Um..."

>
Just before Nabiki could tear into Ranma for bringing home someone whose name she did not know, the little girl spoke up again. "My name's Hotaru. Tomoe Hotaru. Pleased to meet you."

>
While Kasumi was busy bowing in greetings, Nabiki nailed Ranma with the fiercest glare she could muster. "And what could possibly be so important about Miss Tomoe Hotaru that you had to bring her here? I could see she is sick, but why not just take her to a doctor?"

>
"Nabiki!" Kasumi said, scandalised that someone would talk that way in front of a guest.

>
"I couldn't do that! She's the girl I was telling you about from the other night. Quiet Girl, or something. She's one of the magical girls, a good one. I couldn't just leave her out there. What if the Senshi had found her? Do you think they would have taken her in and given her somewhere to stay?"

>
"Ranma-san! It's supposed to be a secret! And my name is Silence Girl!"

>
"Huh? What's supposed to be a secret?"

>
"Who I am!" She said, with a tone of exasperation, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "All magical girls are supposed to keep their identities secret."

>
"But you told me the first time we met."

>
"Mouu... You rescued me. I... I thought you wanted to be on my side, that you could help me bring peace to Tokyo. You were so fast, I was sure that you must have been a magical girl, but... But you didn't even want to tell me what your secret identity was."

>
"Oh, man! I told you before. I ain't got no secret identity. I'm just me, I certainly ain't no magical _girl_, and I got this way by training, lots of really hard training. Right, Old Man?"

>
"Hmmm..." Genma tried to look wise. "No, Boy. You've been slacking in your training too much recently. Mind you... If this is what one of the Sailor Senshi look like, I don't think Ukyo has anything to worry about."

>
Incredibly, Hotaru paled even further at the name Sailor Senshi. When Ranma had bumped into her earlier in the day while out for a short run, he had seen how sick she was, and offered to carry her back to her parent's place. When Hotaru explained about her father being taken over by evil, and her fleeing into the city, Ranma had listened then offered to let her stay at the Tendo's. On the way back to the compound, he had told her all about the ruthless and deadly Senshi, and the demons that were invading. If she wanted peace with these people, it was only fair that she realised the hardened, implacable foes she would be dealing with.

>
"She ain't one of the Senshi, Old Man, and don't you forget it! She's never heard of them, she don't dress like one, and she sure don't act like one. Besides, if she was one of the Senshi, why would two of them have been doing their level best to kill her the first time we met?"

>
"You're far too trusting, Ranma. How do you know she was not sent to infiltrate us and discover our plans?"

>
Ryoga, who had been silent until now, finally spoke up. "Come on, Nabiki. Only you can think like that. Ranma met her, what, the day after we fought the Sailors? Would they really have gone to all that effort in such a short time, just for us?"

>
"No... No, I guess you're right. Besides, it doesn't fit their pattern at all. Everything I've read so far suggests they just turn up and start attacking whatever it is they are after that day. You're probably right."

>
"And remember Black Lady. She wasn't one of the Senshi either."

>
Ranma laughed. "Are you back on her again? This mysterious woman that only you've seen? Are you sure you were even in Japan at the time, P-Chan?"

>
"Why, you!..."

>
Growling like a grizzly bear woken from a comfortable nap, Ryoga surged to his feet and came at Ranma. Seeing his anger directed at

her idol, Hotaru quailed. Although she knew how important it was to all magical girls to keep their identities secret, this might be the only way she could protect Ranma-san. After being saved by Ranma-san twice in such a short period, Hotaru wanted to show her that she also had what it took to be a magical girl. Ryoga had barely gained his feet when Hotaru thrust her hand into the air and called out a phrase they would remember for the rest of their lives:

>
"Saturn Eternal Power! MAKE UP!"

>
Despite her illness, Hotaru seemed to almost levitate to her feet. Indeed, she hovered a good ten centimetres clear of the ground as she was bathed in an intense white light. She rotated on the spot, turning her head and basking in the light, seeming to relish something beyond their comprehension. Since it was the first time they had ever witnessed something of this nature, everyone was stunned speechless and held motionless by the spectacle.

>
It was one thing for Mousse to produce a few knives or chains from within his bulky, voluminous robes, but what Hotaru was doing was another matter entirely. She had been wearing a quite ordinary school uniform, but somehow she made that completely disappear. Without any actions that could be remotely construed as getting dressed, the girl was covered in a white bodysuit, and short blue skirt. Replacing her stockings and shoes were a pair of big blue boots, that would have been impossible to hide in her previous clothing. Of course, all this said nothing of the seven foot tall, bladed pole arm that she now possessed.

>
As usual, Nabiki was the first to gather her wits and speak. "I don't get it... Why did it paint your nails purple only to give you gloves?"

>
Or perhaps she was just the first to speak.

>
Blushing slightly, Hotaru looked at the floor and nervously played with her fingers, while holding the Silence Glaive in front of her, like a psychological shield. "I... I don't know. All I know is that I collapsed one day a week ago, and suddenly I have all these powers. I don't even know why..."

>
Seeing their guest was about to break into tears, Kasumi skittered around the table and wrapped the small girl in a motherly embrace. "It's all right, Little One. You don't need to worry. You're here now, and I'm sure Ranma and Ryoga will make sure you're safe. Won't you?"

>
Both the martial artists nodded, along with Genma. He might be greedy, and he might be cowardly, but the sight of a small, defenceless girl in tears was enough to weaken the resolve of even the most hard-hearted of men.

>
Seeking to cheer up the girl, Kasumi smiled, and used her happiest voice. "And what was the name you were using again? It was something very pretty..."

>
"It was Si... Oh, it's just Hotaru. I... I don't even deserve a name. I couldn't help Daddy, and I couldn't stop those two girls. If... If Ranma-san is so much better than I am, why should I have a special name?" With that, Hotaru gave up the pretence of trying to hold back the tears and caved in. All of the pain - emotional and physical - the strain of living outside, even just the simple fear that had driven her for the last few days suddenly came crashing down. Giving one final hiccough at the end of her speech, Hotaru grabbed on tight and let the tears flow.

>
"Oh! Ranma-san! I want my Daddy back!"

>
Needless to say, Kasumi was not the only one that was surprised when the girl she had been comforting suddenly lurched out of her arms and clung onto Ranma. The boy-turned-girl martial artist frantically began looking around for someone to explain his actions

to, but no violent tomboys showed their faces at this most embarrassing of situations. After waving her arms for a moment, Ranma finally caved into the desperation of her guest and placed her arms around Hotaru's shoulders. Ranma stood there, supporting and rocking the girl slightly, trying to calm her enough that they could resume their conversation - and their lunch.

>
While Hotaru tried to pull herself back together, Nabiki looked on with a coldly emotionless expression. Inside, she was just as touched as anyone else by Hotaru's story, but she knew the importance of keeping those feelings hidden. The instant she showed what she felt, she would be vulnerable to Hotaru's naive charm. Something about this had disturbed her right from the beginning, and Nabiki was only just beginning to understand what it was.

>
Watching Ranma and Hotaru together finally cleared it up for her. Ranma was his usual self; uncomfortable with any close contact or intense feelings. The red-head was sitting there, looking lost, tentatively patting the little girl on the back, obviously wishing that Hotaru had chosen Kasumi to be the her pillar of strength. Hotaru on the other hand was completely the opposite. Although she was obviously distraught, she showed no signs of discomfort holding Ranma so close. From what she had gathered so far, Hotaru did not strike her as a man-hunter, nor had she known Ranma long enough to become one of the many women that decided his curse did not matter.

>
With a smirk, Nabiki climbed to her feet and headed for the kitchen. The only conclusion she could draw was that Hotaru was missing a particularly important piece of information about her saviour, and Nabiki intended to be the one to reveal it. That would prove once and for all whether this girl had really come to them intent on evil, or if it had been the accidental meeting they were suppose to believe. If she poured hot water on Ranma and Hotaru was surprised, everything would be fine. If Hotaru took her idol's sex change in stride, then she must have been forewarned; which means that she knew about them before their first meeting, and that would mean...

>
Back from the kitchen, Nabiki held the kettle in front of her with her left hand, trying to look as innocent as she could. "Hotaru-chan? I don't want you to get the wrong idea, but you might want to consider this, before you start wishing you were like Ranma-kun."

>
With that, Nabiki poured a liberal dose of hot water over Ranma's head. Hotaru - who had been largely ignoring Nabiki and enjoying the feeling of being warm and protected - gasped as she felt Ranma move in ways no normal girl should be able to. The arms holding her lengthened, and their muscles became as hard as rock. The waist her arms had been wrapped around suddenly grew, filling out and feeling even stronger.

>
Pulling back slightly, Hotaru looked up at her idol, the beautiful, powerful Ranma-san. Hotaru blinked twice, trying to clear the view in front of her. Ranma-san was a boy. Ranma-san was definitely a boy. She blinked again and checked. Ranma-san was still a boy. A slightly nervous looking boy, but Hotaru had no doubts that Nabiki had somehow turned Ranma-san into a boy.

>
"Kya!!!" She screamed, backing up rapidly while she summoned her weapon. With shaking knees, Hotaru stood by the door and pointed the business end of the Silence Glaive at Nabiki. "You are a witch! You... You're the same as Kaolinite! She took away my Daddy, and you just changed Ranma-san into a boy! How could you do that? Change her back! Change her back!"

>
Now it was Nabiki's turn to blink in surprise. This was not

quite the reaction she had expected. It proved that Hotaru had not been spying on them, but after Ranma and Ryoga's reports on the strength of magical girl's attacks, the last place she wanted to be was on the business end of one of their weapons.

>
Before she could stammer out a response, Ranma had moved. Placing himself between Hotaru and Nabiki, he stepped forwards until the sharp point on the Silence Glaive just touched his chest. "Shh... It's OK, Hotaru. There's no need to get all upset or nothing. It's just my curse. Come on, put the weapon down, and we can talk about it. Ryoga! Don't move!"

>
Hotaru's eyes flicked to where Ryoga had been edging around the side of her, only to see that Ranma-san's father was also there. What had she gotten herself into? She sniffled slightly and backed up. "But... But she turned you into a boy, Ranma-san! What... What if she wants to do that to me next?"

>
Ranma gave a chuckle, and that did more to reassure Hotaru than any number of explanations. It was an honest laugh, bright and cheerful; untainted by gloating or malice. "It ain't like that, Hotaru-chan. It's a curse I've got. Hot water changes me back into a guy. It's what I was trying to tell you before."

>
Realisation dawned on Hotaru, and her face lit up as relief washed over it. "I... I understand now. You really are a magical girl like me. But... But some evil witch cursed you to change into a boy. Oh, Ranma-san! I'm so sorry for you!"

>
Again she hid her weapon, and moved in to comfort poor Ranma-san. Hotaru was even more inspired by the way that Ranma-san was so strong even with such a terrible curse. Before she managed to reach Ranma and give him a comforting hug, the boy kneeled down and placed his hands on her shoulders, looking at her seriously.

>
"No, you still don't understand. I ain't a magical girl, I ain't a girl of any sort. I'm a guy, and I'm a martial artist. When I was training in China, I got cursed. Now I turn into a girl when I get splashed with cold water."

>
Hotaru hung her head and looked away. "I... I'm sorry. I thought... I thought you were a real girl. I.. I was so stupid... I... Excuse me, please!"

>
With that, she turned and dashed out of the room, a few silvery tears falling softly to the mats in the wake of her passage. Concern written all over his face, Ranma stood up and took a step in her direction before he felt the gentle but sure hand of Kasumi on his shoulder.

>
"Don't worry, Ranma-kun. I'll have a talk to Hotaru-chan. I'm sure she just is feeling a little silly at the moment. I'm sure it will be all right."

>
As Kasumi left the room, everyone watched, confusion preventing people from talking for long moments as they tried to take in what they had seen. Eventually, Nabiki spoke: "You always have such interesting friends, don't you, Ranma-kun?"

>
* * *

>
The house was quiet out the back, where Genma eventually found Soun. The tall, lanky man was trimming and tidying the grass on the side of the rear entrance to the compound. Genma smiled in memory of the first time he had been here. Out the front, there was a sign requesting visitors to come around to here "to challenge the owner to battle". This was obviously the path they would use.

>
Or would have used, had there been anyone capable of defending the dojo. Although Genma and Ranma were both highly competent martial artists, without the claim of Ranma's marriage to Akane, neither had a right to defend the dojo. Since the idea of Nabiki or the gentle

Kasumi fighting a dojo challenger was simple ludicrous, that left Soun as the dojo's one defender.

>
"I remember a young man from many years ago, not much older than Ranma, he was. A great martial artist." Genma began.

>
Soun looked up at his friend, then looked away again. Lack of hunger had reduced the thin man further, and Genma knew that he was not the only one concerned for the man's health. Coughing once, Genma tried again. "Trained under the harshest of masters, he was a warrior of great power. A tower of strength to all who knew him. I wonder what happened to him?"

>
"He failed, Old Friend. He failed."

>
"Really?" Genma pretended to look around for a moment. "You must be thinking of a different man to the one I knew. The man I knew still has much to live for. People who depend on him."

>
Soun stiffened slightly and looked back at Genma. "My daughter is dead, Saotome-kun. Killed because I could not defend her or teach her well enough. What sort of a father does that make me?"

>
"It makes you human. What makes you great is the way you raised your daughter. She was a martial artist, she understood the way of honour. What would have thought of your training if Akane had run and left Nabiki instead?"

>
With a growl, Soun clenched his fists, rose, and advanced on Genma. "My little girl was not at fault! Akane acted with honour! My little girl died saving her sister, fighting monsters that should never have existed! It was my fault! If I had been there, if I had not let her go out..."

>
"Akane is gone, Soun. My friend, we will love her forever, but nothing can bring her back. But you have two more beautiful daughters, and they need you. It hurts them to see you like this, slowly fading away. Don't forget about the living, Old Friend. There is still much to be done."

>
Soun snorted and turned away. "What can I do? I am weak. I'm not half of the martial artist I once was when I trained under the master. I---"

>
"You can help me. Teaching Ranma half of the Yama Sen Ken would be worse than nothing at all. Heh... Even if I knew half the technique to still be able to teach it. But you, my friend. You know me better than anyone else in the world. Together... Together we will bring it back."

>
"You mean... You want me to train with you? I've seen you fight with Ranma... I know I'm not up to your standard any more."

>
"Bah. It's like falling off a log. You'll remember soon enough. Come, attack me. Since the Master is still at the beach, we have some time to train together like we once did. Together we can bring back the techniques that have been lost to the world. With the Saotome Secret techniques at our fingertips, who would dare to attack your children again? Who would be able to hurt my heir?"

>
Soun looked down at his hands, slowly opening and closing his fists. It had been so long since he had used them seriously. Oh, at times he had sallied forth with his friend to battle the Master or something like that, but he could not even remember the last time he had seriously fought anyone. Dimly, he could hear Genma continuing to speak behind him.

>
"When we are not training the kids, we will work together. We will try what I can remember, and we will create my Secret Techniques again. I shall write them down this time, so that they will never be forgotten. And once we are ready, we shall teach them to Ranma and to your girls too. Stand by me, Soun. Tell me the Tendo School is not yet dead."

>
Maybe... Maybe Genma was right. He still had two daughters to protect. He still had the chance to make his mark on the world. Closing his hands into fists, Soun turned back to Genma and looked him in the eye. For the first time in two weeks, his face held an emotion other than hopelessness.

>
Determination.

>
* * *

>
The Dark Moon Family was not what it once was. Before it had been a real family, with children, life and hope. In the same way that Queen Serenity of the future had destroyed so much and taken so much from Prince Diamond and his family, so the Sailor Senshi had done the same in this era.

>
The poor Ayakashi Sisters' minds had been destroyed in this time, Wiseman had told them. When they failed to destroy the Senshi, their leader Sailor Moon had used her magic to brainwash them, sealing away their powers and reducing them to mortals. Worse still she ruined their once proud and determined minds, making them willing and compliant members of today's society. These women were of Diamond's blood, refugees like himself from Crystal Tokyo; to see them reduce to such a petty, menial state distressed the Prince no end.

>
The indignities did not stop there. Rubeus, a man as close as a brother to Diamond had been slain by more of Serenity's "justice". Imprisoned within his spaceship, he had been left to die by the Senshi. For all of Queen Serenity's talk of love and justice, the Wiseman had shown Diamond the truth of those statements. The Queen of the future held everyone in thrall, making the supplicant populous of Crystal Tokyo believe they had paradise. In the same way, the Moon Princess of this era was just as much an iron fist within a velvet glove.

>
Although Sailor Moon hid behind pretty speeches and a face so angelic that it tempted Diamond to distraction every time he saw her, Diamond had no choice but to believe the evidence that was presented to him by the Wiseman. Shortly after they had fled to the past to be able to put a permanent stop to Serenity's conquest and supposed "world peace", Wiseman had shown all of the Dark Moon Family the truth about what had led up to Emerald's death.

>
Wiseman carefully showed Diamond how Serenity and Sailor Moon had contrived to manipulate the almost defenceless Emerald into donning a special crown. That crown had only been designed for the true rulers of the Dark Moon Family; only Diamond himself would have been able to cope with the power which it gave you access to. Wiseman said that Moon had known full well what the effect of that crown would be, and had replayed the scene from that point onwards so that they could all watch it in exquisite detail.

>
Everyone one in the room had seen the tortured contortions of Emerald as she suffered from the massive quantity of power being routed to her from the Dark Crystal. Nemesis, that dark crystal planet that provided all their power in the future had been too much, and Emerald had snapped. Distorted by the power, she had turned into a dragon, a beast with only one thought in its pain wracked mind: kill Sailor Moon, the architect of its pain.

>
Needless to say, everyone in the room had been shocked and horrified with the casual way the Senshi had attacked the dragon that had been Emerald. Once you accepted Wiseman's statement that they had orchestrated the whole affair to allow them to kill Emerald, it became even worse. The way that Wiseman froze the last frame of the battle's replay touched them all. Clearly on the screen in front of them, they could see the smiling, pleased faces of Sailor Jupiter and Sailor Moon. Twin murderers, enemies of everyone, and most especially

enemies of the Dark Moon Family.

>
Everyone had been disturbed by that death scene, but none more than Emerald. Witnessing your own insanity and death was not a nice thing, and she could only be glad that it had not really happened to her. The Wiseman had explained that it all had to do with time travel, and therefore it was Sailor Pluto's fault. Obviously her machinations in the time stream had failed this time, because Emerald was quite well and alive. When Prince Diamond and his entourage had come back to Sailor Moon's era, they had arrived before Emerald left.

>
That was the one bright spot in this whole rebellion. The Dark Moon Family, although grievously wounded by the loss of their beloved sisters and Rubeus, was still strong, and would not be defeated by someone as petty as Sailor Moon and her Sailor Senshi. Now that he had seen the strength of the Sailor Senshi - especially the unified team he had faced in the future - Diamond had not shirked with his assistance of Emerald. Although she had fought the Senshi as individuals or small teams, apparently their trip to the future had unified their spirit. This made it all the more fortunate that Diamond had upgraded the strength of the Droids that Emerald produced.

>
Since she had fought the Senshi as individuals, Emerald had been fortunate enough to accumulate a number of victories. Over the weeks that she had fought the girls, Emerald had managed to start a small trickle of Dark Energy from the future back into the present. Soon that trickle would become a stream, then a flood. With the new and improved Droids that the Senshi were just beginning to face, and Black Lady duplicating Emerald's effort, soon they would have no chance of failure.

>
Black Lady, now there was someone the whole family could be proud of. Wiseman had done a magnificent job with her, allowing her to see through the web of lies and illusion that Queen Serenity and Sailor Moon had woven. However, rather than waste a valuable person as Sailor Moon had done when she used her magic to brainwash the four sisters, the Wiseman had gained them an ally.

>
Black Lady was now a staunch opponent of the Queen and Sailor Moon. The rabbit's own power had been multiplied many times by the access to the Dark Crystal. Here again, Serenity's blood showed through, demonstrating the girl's capacity for power and destruction. Although Wiseman had advanced her physical age to make her a better ally, there could be no doubt that Black Lady was born to rule. Unlike Emerald, there was no chance of Black Lady being driven insane if she had total control over the Dark Crystal. Like Diamond and Serenity, Black Lady was born to handle power.

>
Although he still longed for the beautiful and vulnerable appearing Sailor Moon, Diamond feared that she was beyond his grasp. He would continue to try to make her see the error of her ways and accept his leadership, but that may not be possible. Should he fail in that endeavour...

>
Diamond's eye's flicked to the luxurious form of Black Lady who was reclining on a chair made from Luna-P. She had the bearing, the power and the looks of a Queen. All she was missing at the moment was the intelligence and experience that time would bring, and a land to hold dominion over. Diamond had plans to rectify that last one, and if Sailor Moon could not be made to see reason, then he could wait for Black Lady to grow out of her childish petulance.

>
"Wiseman! You called us all here for a reason, I assume?"

>
"Indeed." Wiseman spoke softly, forcing everyone else to be

silent so that they could hear. The room - hidden from the Senshi's prying eyes - contained the entire remnants of the Family. Diamond, Sapphire, Emerald, Black Lady and their adviser, the Wiseman. Less than half the number they started with, but still retaining almost all the power the Dark Moon Family ever possessed.

>
"I have asked you here to show you how we shall win this war."

>
With that, the Wiseman turned the glowing, constantly colour-shifting ball in his hands. With a sudden rush, the ball expanded, holding them within a world of changing, pastel colours. Beneath their feet, a map of present-day Tokyo was revealed. Looking down, as though from a great height, they could see everything, set out in perfect detail.

>
"With Emerald, Diamond and Black Lady all here, the Senshi are completely incapable of defeating us. Were we to work as individuals, even I could not say if we would triumph. But now, together, as a family, we cannot fail."

>
Emerald smirked and then spared Black Lady a withering look before fluttering her eyelashes at Diamond. "I'm sure that you are right, Wiseman, but do we really need someone like this? If Diamond-sama and myself worked together - closely together - I'm sure that we could do everything that we need."

>
A soft growl issued from deep within the Wiseman's grey cowl, then there was silence for several long moments. Although Emerald could not see his face, she could feel the Wiseman's piercing eyes bore through her. When he eventually spoke, it was in a voice all the more alarming for its calm measured tone.

>
"You forget yourself, Emerald. It is not your place to question my orders, merely to obey them."

>
"Y-Yes, Wiseman."

>
"Very well." There was no sign of movement within the shadows that hid the Wiseman's face, but the feeling of scrutiny passed with an almost palpable easing. "The key to our victory is strategy. We can already overwhelm the Senshi if we need to, but it is unlikely the opportunity will present itself."

>
With a gesture of one of the Wiseman's oddly glowing hands, a selection of glowing points appeared on the map. "These are the Crystal Points, the foundations of Crystal Tokyo. Although the Senshi are familiar with them due to the four sister's failure, we shall strike again. If you succeed, then Crystal Tokyo will never be able to be built and our victory is assured. Black Lady, I leave this in your capable hands."

>
Black Lady bowed her head briefly and looked on with a slight smile as the Wiseman continued to outline his plan for victory. "Emerald. Despite your limited success to date, you shall continue with your plan to exploit the weak points in space and time. For each weak point that you manage to conquer and place a fragment of the Dark Crystal, we shall be able to bring through more and more energy."

>
Rotating slightly, the Wiseman faced the last member of his plan. "Prince Diamond. You shall attack these points. When we secure them, I will be fully capable of bringing through all the Dark Crystal energy we will ever need. The future we all know and hate will never come into existence."

>
"Now it is you who forgets himself, Wiseman. I am not your lackey to be ordered about. This is my rebellion, and I am its leader. You may proceed with the rest of your plan, but I have other tasks to complete. Out there is Sailor Moon, I will ensure that she either joins us as my wife, or shall never be a threat to us again."

>
"As you wish, my prince. It was merely a suggestion. The power of my plan is its beauty and simplicity. Should any one person succeed, we will have won. Even without any individual completing their role, soon we shall bring through enough Dark Energy to render Queen Serenity's future impossible. Nothing shall stand in our way!"

>
As everyone laughed at the thought of victory of Serenity and her Senshi, the Wiseman bowed. Darkness captured the room as the Wiseman released his magic and the glowing map faded. As the light returned and people again began moving, he looked out of the folds of his cloak and thought murderous things. "Very well, Prince Diamond. I shall find another pawn to play the role I need. No-one shall hold me from my destiny."

>
* * *

>
No-one expected it to happen the way that it did, but in hindsight, it could have occurred no other way. Sailor Moon was fundamentally of too good heart to even consider starting a war against the Outer Senshi. She had heard all of the arguments about their violent nature, she had seen the newspaper reports that portrayed the Outers as being as bad as the demons they fought.

>
Even the Outer Senshi did not really want to start a fight against Sailor Moon and her Senshi. Although they had actively opposed the older girls before, the Senshi's attitude towards their princesses was hard to disregard. Furthermore, sheer logic stated that it was better to avoid enlarging their present conflict even further. The Outers knew that they had time on their side. Once the present evil was dealt with, there would be plenty of time to remove the pretender to the throne, and find a suitable candidate that they could sponsor as the new Moon Queen.

>
So it started in much the same way as so many other wars in history. Both sides began with misconceptions about the other side, which primed them mentally to see only one possible reason for their counterpart's actions. A few misunderstood words, a little over-enthusiasm, and a momentary lapse in judgement, and a city was plunged into a new war that it could never comprehend.

>
When the Outer Senshi saw Emerald sucking the life out of people to power her Dark Crystal statue, they understood immediately what needed to be done. This woman - obviously evil - needed to be stopped. She needed to be stopped now, before she became too powerful for them to defeat. Without the backing of other Senshi - even Pluto or Saturn - the risk of Emerald's statue growing off people's energy then being used against them was too great a risk.

>
When Sailor Moon and her Senshi saw Emerald and her magically growing statue, they had the familiarity of experience with them. By now, they could hardly count the number of times they had fought the evil woman. Moon giggled slightly as she ran towards the fight, thinking that Mercury could probably tell them exactly how many times they had fought Emerald and every other bad guy they had ever faced. It was nice to be able to count on Mercury like that.

>
Despite the fact that she did not have Sailor Mercury's remarkable memory, nor Sailor Mars' ability to see the future, Moon knew from experience what was needed of her. Soon Emerald's statue would be large enough and powerful enough to summon a Droid. While it would tax them inordinately to be able to defeat the Droid, it was the safest option in the long run. An attack on the statue at the moment could only shatter it, something they would rather avoid with that many innocent people nearby. Simply by defeating the Droid, they could cause the statue to fall, turn black and harmlessly collapse into dust.

>
That was why Sailor Moon panicked when she saw the Outer Senshi. By the time the Inner's were close enough to engage their enemy, the Outers were already engaging, ready to rip into the statue and reduce the threat to just Emerald. Sailor Moon knew what would happen if they did that, people would die; innocent people. Destroying the statue that close to civilians would be like dropping a glass bowl filled with overripe tomatoes. Sailor Moon knew, she had done that very thing only a few weeks ago when she was trying to help her mother clean out the fridge. Sharp, deadly shards would slice straight through anything, and all that would remain was a terrible, messy pile of red remains. Looking at the sleeping faces of the people Emerald had drained for the energy, Moon knew she could never allow it to happen.

>
Faster on the uptake and quicker to realise the horrible implications of the Outer's preparedness, Moon was in front of the team and moving into harm's way before her guardians could stop her. While assorted pretty soldiers called out for her to stop, Sailor Moon dashed through the circle of unconscious people, interposing herself between the Dark Crystal and the oncoming energy of the World Shaking unleashed by Sailor Uranus.

>
"No! She has to be able to summon the Droid! Ahhh---!"

>
To the Outers, this was the final evidence they needed. Here was Sailor Moon, purported champion of love and justice willing to risk her life to save an edifice of evil. Willing to risk major bodily harm while proclaiming the need for enemy to be able to advance their numbers.

>
It was equally clear what had happened from the Inner's perspective. Sailor Moon, again demonstrating those rare flashes of brilliance that made her the princess had seen what they all missed: the safety of those near the Crystal. Not only had she tried to warn the Outers, who obviously did not care about the innocents, she also risked herself. That risk became an actuality in their eyes when Sailor Uranus callously blasted their leader, forever labelling them as enemies of the Moon Kingdom.

>
Moon rolled along the ground for several meters, her arms and legs flopping in an uncontrolled manner. Her scream, cut short in mid-voice, was enough to spur the others to action. Trying to briefly ignore the charred appearance of the girl's chest and stomach where she had caught the blast, the Inner's devoted their efforts to securing the area enough so that they could rescue the fallen heroine.

>
Mars, Venus, Mercury and Jupiter had lined up, with anger in their eyes. With death in her eyes and fire in her heart, Sailor Mars pointed a finger at the two Sailors facing them off to the side of the statue. "If you think you can get away with attacking Sailor Moon, you're in for a big surprise, you creeps. I'm going to make you burn for that one! BURNING MANDALA!"

>
Searing circles of fire began to spray from Mars' extended hands. Crossing the distance to the unprepared Outer Senshi, they quickly sent the bigger girls diving out of the way, seeking cover from the heat. With their leader lying in a smoking heap at the feet of a rapidly forming Droid, the Inner Senshi were of one mind, and quickly followed Mars' example.

>
Lightning, ice, and orange energy flew across the ground in rapid succession, ruffling the clothes of the unconscious civilians when they came too close, but otherwise leaving them unharmed. Some girls take care of bystanders when they open fire, and none of the Inner's would even contemplate avenging Moon at the cost of hurting the people they were protecting from the Outers. The Outers themselves were entirely another matter.

>
Each of the Inners was the reincarnation of a woman who had sworn to give her life to defend their princess. Time and again they had demonstrated that same devotion to the reborn Sailor Moon, and these women, their purported allies had spat on that ideal. To attack the pretty sailor suited defender of love and justice was something reserved for enemies of the Moon Kingdom and the Sailor Senshi. By that one, hasty action, the Outer Senshi had clearly branded themselves traitors in the eyes of the Inners.

>
Sailor Moon might see things differently - she often did - but she was unconscious at the moment. Almost the very instant that Sailor Uranus' golden globe struck the fair Sailor Moon in the chest, Tuxedo Kamen had leapt from his position hidden on a nearby roof. Although his cape fluttered majestically in the breeze like it always did, this time no-one paid him any attention. His normal practice of distracting an enemy with a well placed rose was equally ignored for the expediency of speed. His one true love was injured and unmoving, and he needed to reach her side as soon as possible.

>
The quiet dignity that the injured Moon bore her injury was one of the greatest motivators for Tuxedo Kamen's speed. Had she been only lightly wounded, she would have been screaming and crying, creating enough of a tantrum that the whole of Tokyo would have known about it. If her injury had been a serious one, the masked defender knew that all it would have done was exposed the true metal that made his love great. Only in her greatest adversity did Moon's power reach its peak. If she was hurt and capable of lifting only a single finger, Tuxedo Kamen knew she would have found some way to stand beside her friends and protect the innocents she had taken to blast to save.

>
Sailor Moon was silent, and that scared him. Moon was never quiet. When he reached the ground, Tuxedo Kamen ignored the sounds of vigorous battle behind him and spread his cloak protectively over Sailor Moon. She was injured and unconscious, but she was breathing, and that was enough to garner a sigh of relief. After checking her pulse, the man in the tuxedo held the smaller girl close to him and breathed deeply. It was just like this girl; get horribly injured while he was watching just to protect some people she had never met before. Perhaps that was why he loved her.

>
Not quite knowing what alerted him to the attack, Tuxedo Kamen jumped, carrying Sailor Moon in his hands. Landing with a turn and a flourish that swirled his cape behind him, Tuxedo Kamen took in the sight of the Droid with slitted eyes. "To attack the defenceless citizens of Tokyo is unacceptable, minion of the Dark Moon. To fight in league with those who would harm Sailor Moon, you place your life in grave danger. Leave now and perhaps you will live to see this day's end."

>
Needless to say, the Droid was not in the least perturbed by the prince's threat. With the uncaring Emerald pulling its strings, the Droid would have attacked him regardless of what its preferences may have been. From Emerald's point of view, the Droid was an expendable soldier, and a burdened Tuxedo Kamen with a stricken Moon was too tempting to ignore.

>
When the Droid bellowed once more and charged him, Tuxedo Kamen jumped almost straight up, his cape spread out behind him like a blood red stain on the darkening sky as he slowly moved overhead. In the darkness, his mask and passenger seemed to almost shine whitely, a brilliance in the darkness. As he touched down on another roof, the gallant hero took only a single moment to taste of his princess' lips before jumping back to the street below.

>
Extending his cane to slightly over a meter, Tuxedo Kamen felt a slight quiver of fear inside, but crushed it completely with the

necessity of duty. Fighting these monsters was the Senshi's speciality, not his. He aided, and he knew that he could hold his own for a while, but he did not have the impact of their magic, and there was no way that he could truly expect to win.

>
His first blows against the Droid washed away his fears. The Droid was neither particularly fast, nor was it an intellectual giant. It would be child's play for someone of his skill and magical dexterity to be able to avoid it for almost any period, and he could take it apart at his leisure. His third run in for an attack was abruptly cut short when the Droid demonstrated a remarkable ability to extend its arms by a staggering length, and with a speed that defied observation. Before he knew what had hit him, Tuxedo Kamen was flying backwards across the street, trying to come to terms with a new pain in his jaw, and the salty tang of blood in his mouth.

>
One hit does not win a battle, however, and Tuxedo Kamen climbed back to his feet well before the Droid could make good on its victory. "Savour that hit. It will be the last one you're going to get."

>
A more wary and cautious Tuxedo Kamen continued to hold the Droid at bay while the Inner Senshi battled their outer planet sister soldiers. Two Outer Senshi, both confident in their powers were not really a good match for four Inners, even though the girls were enraged over the attack on Sailor Moon.

>
The Outer's might not have had the recent combat experience of the Inner Senshi who had been fighting Beryl and the Dark Moon Family for almost a year, but the older girls were naturally more capable, and they possessed one big advantage. The Outers had Sailor Uranus, and she was a warrior through and through. Sailor Uranus was veteran of uncountable number of battles, often against foes both more numerous and more powerful than the Inners. Sailor Uranus was experienced, and in this battle, that made a big difference.

>
Unhindered by conscience or pity, Sailor Uranus directed herself and Sailor Neptune in the art of battle with a skill grown in battles millennia past. To Uranus - and by extension Neptune - these were not living breathing people, the Inners were just targets. They were obstacles to be destroyed, enemies of the Moon Kingdom and all it stood for. There was never any hesitation on Uranus' behalf when it came time to fire deadly magic at the other girls. Equally, when she saw the advantages of using the civilians as an effective lever against the Inners, she used that too. If it cost a few innocent lives to destroy the Inner Senshi, that was a price she could accept. The Inners represented one of the greatest threats to the success of the Outers, and the final victory of the Outer Senshi's protection of the planet and the Kingdom mattered more than the lives of a few insignificant people.

>
It did not take too long before the girls of the Inner Senshi were all battered and worn. Unlike Sailor Moon, when Jupiter and Mercury had been hit by the World Shaking, they were able to have prepared their defences in time, and the blasts hurt but did not cripple them to the same extent that it had done to their leader. That was not to say that either of them were feeling in top shape, but it did let them keep fighting. It also placed a continually increasing burden on Sailor Venus, the only Inner Senshi who was unhurt by anything more than near misses.

>
Mars, who had done so well at the start of the fight had made the mistake of concentrating on Sailor Uranus when she had found a small opening. This had left her wide open for Neptune's Deep Submerge, and now she was moving at a dangerously slow pace, her ribs

grinding in a most unpleasant fashion with every step or sharp move. Moves of that sort also seemed to happen in abundance as she hopped and turned, valiantly trying to avoid any more of the magical punishment metered out by the bigger girls.

>
When Sailor Mercury was hit by a lucky combination of two very near misses of the Outer's magic, she was knocked to ground stunned. Only Jupiter's vigilance and quick thinking rescued the quiet Senshi before a follow up attack landed in the freshly vacated space. "Are you all right, Mercury?"

>
"I... I'm fine, Jupiter... Just leave me here. You need to stop that Droid and the Outers before anyone else gets hurt."

>
"You've got to be kidding! I can't leave you here! If I did that, the first second my back was turned, they'd be gunning for you."

>
"You have to, Sailor Jupiter! I can't let you be slowed down by me, they would just get us both. Just think about what Sailor Moon would want us to do. We have to save all those innocent people."

>
Jupiter looked hesitant for a moment, then she gave a short sharp nod. "Venus! Mars! Grab a couple of people from near the Crystal! We have to get out of here!"

>
With a short squawk of surprise, Sailor Mercury again found herself scooped up in Jupiter's arms as the tall girl carried her away from the Outers at her best possible speed. With only the slightest of slowing, Jupiter curved past the ring of unconscious people around the Crystal and snagged a body. Grunting with exertions, Jupiter's breath came quickly and deeply as she sprinted off down the street.

>
Moving like the well-oiled team that they were, Venus and Mars were quick to understand what Jupiter wanted. Neither of them liked it - actually, they hated the idea of defeat and fleeing the battlefield - but they had no choice. Without Sailor Moon, the Outer Senshi out matched them. Perhaps if they had Tuxedo Kamen with them, they could have won, but he too was busy fighting a losing battle against the Droid as a delaying action.

>
With a expression of fierce determination on her pretty face, Sailor Venus called down a Venus Crescent Beam Shower between herself and the Outers. Making the spectacular magic display roll backwards towards the Outers, Venus did her best to buy them the time they needed to escape. Not intending to make a martyr of herself, Venus ended the draining magic attack before she exhausted herself and turned and ran. Angry voices rang out behind her, but that did not stop her from taking time to grab a couple of people and follow Mars' red shoes around a corner and down the street.

>
As the Outer's magical blasts began to strike near Sailor Venus, Emerald lost her amused expression. Those dangerous blasts were far too close for comfort to her precious Crystal. Knowing that the wounded Tuxedo Kamen would be likely to make a retreat with his friends taking Sailor Moon with him, Emerald commanded the Droid to shift its attentions to the two Outer Senshi.

>
A relatively slow moving target, the Droid would have been an easy shot for Sailor Moon's Moon Princess Halation, her standard Droid killer. That same speed put it at a disadvantage when fighting the sprightly Outer Senshi. Their powerful attacks carved large chunks from the Droid, making it bellow in pain, but this was one of Diamond's improved models, and it would not fall quickly.

>
Tired already from their casual release of large quantities of magic against the Inners, the Outers took some serious lumps from the

speed hitting Droid before they managed to get the better of it. As Emerald watched from on high, Sailor Neptune and Uranus traded blows and magic with the Droid, leaving the street and nearby building a shattered ruin from the effect of their attacks. Every time Sailor Uranus cast her World Shaking, the yellow ball of magical energy would burrow through the ground just below the surface, cracking and ruining the road before it finally burst up to impact its target. Neptune's Deep Submerge was not much better, as the excess energy would typically damage everything around the target.

>
The Outer Senshi did eventually win, causing Emerald to flutter her fan and curse in anger before disappearing. As the Droid turned to dust and its energy crystal turned dark and lifeless, the Dark Crystal statue that Emerald had created fell to the street and shrank down to miniature size before it too harmlessly vanished.

>
The Outer Senshi cared little for these minor details. They had succeeded. They were sore, cut or burnt in many places and about to collapse from exhaustion, but they had won. They had driven off both the treacherous Inner Senshi, defeated a Droid, and prevented Emerald from completing another stage of her mystifying plan. Quitting the battlefield, the Outers sought somewhere to hide and change back into their normal forms. Every step hurt more that way, but it was much more inconspicuous to see two school girls walking along than it was to see a pair of battle weary Senshi.

>
Of all the parties involved in the battle, none really felt that they had much to be happy about, despite their minor victories. Emerald had just seen the Senshi fighting amongst themselves apparently in an effort to protect her statue. The Inner Senshi had saved numerous people, and the Droid was defeated, but they too had lost a battle. Sailor Moon was already recovering, but it was their first defeat in such a manner. The Outers too had little to be happy about. No-one had died this time, but that had little to do with their actions. Instead, they had resoundingly verified the Inners as their enemies, and the mastermind behind the Droid has escaped again.

>
It was battle that had no true winners, only losers.

>
* * *

>
Kasumi stepped out onto the back porch of the Tendo home and watched Ranma and Ryoga's audience of one. Little Hotaru-chan was kneeling on the wooden porch, watching the two boys fight with an expression of amazed awe on her face. Kasumi could not help but smile as she watched the young girl. She looked so sweet and innocent sitting there, as though there was not a care in the world and the terrible fight that the boys were training for was all just a bad dream.

>
After lunch, when Nabiki had gone out again to raise some money, Kasumi had been stunned to see Ranma come upstairs and send Hotaru off to bed again, demanding that she get some rest. Kasumi could not remember the last time she had seen him quite so firm and demanding, while being so compassionate at the same time. He had always shown the compassionate side when Akane had been injured, but he had tried to hide it behind a protective barrier. Things were obviously different with Hotaru, since the little girl seemed so weak and defenceless. It brought out the protective guardian in anyone.

>
Kasumi had chased Ranma out of the room before he put Hotaru to bed and sent him downstairs with a promise that she would get Hotaru to rest. Rather than let the little girl go back to sleep in her torn and dirty clothes, Kasumi had brought in one of her oversized T-shirts. The shirt that had been big on Kasumi would be a full-size, warm dress for the child, and Kasumi promised to give it to her as

soon as she had a bath and was clean enough to wear it. Naturally, Hotaru had not taken much convincing, and shortly she was back in bed, snug, clean and warm.

>
That had been a couple of hours ago, and Kasumi had retired from the room to clean and repair Hotaru's clothes. The reason she had eventually ventured out onto the porch was to watch Ranma and Ryoga train, in much the same way that Hotaru was doing. It brought bittersweet tears to her eyes to think of how loyally Ranma and his friends tried to do the right thing by Akane. She knew that if he had been there, he would have saved Akane, but...

>
"Kasumi-nee-chan? Why are you crying?"

>
Kasumi brushed a tear and returned with a smile. "I was just worried about our boys out there. I should be worried about you too, little firefly, sneaking out of bed like that."

>
Looking at the ground, Hotaru spoke softly. "I'm sorry, Kasumi-nee-chan. I woke up, and when I heard Ranma-san down here, I had to come and watch. He... He's so amazing!"

>
Relaxing for a moment, Kasumi sat next to Hotaru and placed an arm around her shoulder. Being with Ranma for so many months, she realised she was beginning to accept his amazing feats as ordinary. For a while, she let herself forget the past, and the incredible feats she had seen Ranma perform on a daily basis, and instead tried to see it through fresh eyes; eyes innocent and unbiased like Hotaru's.

>
"He is very good, isn't he. They both are really."

>
A nod. "Ranma-san is better. Ranma-san is the best."

>
"Well, he is very good. Ohhh! Look at that jump! He's so clever." Kasumi took a moment to watch as Ranma gracefully landed behind Ryoga and sent a few punches into the bigger boy's back. "But there are other people out there that might be better."

>
Hotaru shook her head. There was a certain fire in her eyes as she watched Ranma. "No way. No-one is better than Ranma-san. He's the best. He might not be as powerful as I am, but I bet he can do more. It's so cool. Do you think being able to jump like that is more fun than flying?"

>
"I'm not sure, Hotaru-chan. I can't do either of them. Can you?"

>
"I can..." Sparing a look from the combatants, Kasumi looked down at where Hotaru was staring at her lap and playing with the yellow fabric of the oversized shirt she was wearing.

>
"Why so sad, Hotaru-chan? I thought you would have been happy to be able to fly. I know I would. Can you imagine what it would be like, sailing through the sky with all those pretty little birds? Watching the clouds pass beneath you. Nothing to worry about but you and the air around you. Some days I wish I could fly."

>
Hearing the small giggle, Kasumi knew she had managed to relieve the girl again, bringing her back from whatever depressing thought had begun to enter her pretty little head. "That's so pretty, Kasumi-nee-chan. I'm not strong enough to carry someone now, but when I'm bigger, you'll be my first passenger. I promise. We'll go up see all the clouds and birds and all the pretty things."

>
"That's very generous of you, Hotaru-chan. Thank you, I shall look forward to it. Hmmm. I think those boys are looking rather hot. Do you think we should get them a drink?"

>
"Nnn." Hotaru nodded, and started to stand, but Kasumi shushed her and left her to watch Ranma and Ryoga while she went to fetch some chilled tea. In just a couple of minutes, Kasumi returned with a tray laden with a pitcher of chilled tea and four glasses. Since her father and Saotome-san were out the back, she would take some to them

later.

>
As Kasumi set the tray down and began to pour she hesitated and then spoke in a gentle voice. "A few minutes ago, you said that Ranma was very good, but he was not as powerful as you. Does this mean you have one of those magical attacks Nabiki has been telling us about?"

>
"Yes, Kasumi-nee-chan." Hotaru said as she moved another glass closer for Kasumi to pour into. "I've got two of them."

>
Carefully, and making sure she did not sound worried, Kasumi gently asked the question that had been tumbling around in her mind since Hotaru had transformed at lunch time. "What does your attack do, Hotaru-chan? How much does it affect?"

>
"Everything."

>
Kasumi's hand had only the slightest shiver, a credit to her implacable calm. "What do you mean, 'everything'?"

>
Holding onto a glass filled with cold tea and colder ice-cubes, Hotaru looked up and met Kasumi's eyes with her own guileless purple ones. "Everything. The whole world. Everything, all gone. Why do I have an attack like that, Kasumi-nee-chan? What can I ever need it for?"

>
"I... I don't know, Hotaru-chan. I... Why don't you give that drink to Ranma-kun. He looks very hot, jumping around out there." With a nod and smile, Hotaru rushed to her feet and ran the short distance into the yard to where the boys were. "Oh, you poor dear. You poor, poor child."

>
As soon as Ranma heard Hotaru's eager voice call out to him, he signalled Ryoga to stop and they settled back to the ground. For a moment he watched the way that she ran to him, holding the glass inviting liquid that was already beading moisture around the outside.

>
"Ranma-san! I brought a drink for you." She said slightly breathlessly.

>
"Thank you, Hotaru-chan." Ranma reached down to take the glass, slightly alarmed at the way Hotaru was breathing heavily at such a short run. Literally, the distance could not have been more than ten meters, but already she was puffing slightly. 'Surely that can't be normal,' he thought.

>
"Hey, don't I get one too?" Ryoga asked with a friendly teasing note in his usually gruff voice.

>
"Here you are, Ryoga-kun. And one for you too, Hotaru-chan."

>
"Thanks, Kasumi-san."

>
"Thank you, Kasumi-nee-chan."

>
After taking a long swallow of his drink, Ranma glanced down and noticed the way that Hotaru was just staring at him, not even noticing her drink. "What? Is there something on my shirt?"

>
Hotaru giggled and blushed, looking away. "That was so cool, Ranma-san. That was even better than when you rescued me."

>
"Heh! See, Ryoga? Someone recognises who's the best when they see 'em."

>
Ryoga gave a snort. "Ahh, she just doesn't know the difference. All that jumping around and stuff isn't what a real fight is about."

>
"Hey, laugh it up, P-Chan. I'll show you who's the best next time we meet the Senshi. _That's_ a real challenge for you."

>
Looking down into her drink, Hotaru ventured boldly to defend

her hero. "I know you're the best, Ranma-san. I bet there's no-one in the whole wide world that's better than you are. You're so clever, and fast, and you can turn into a girl. I wish I was as good as you are."

>
"Hey, ain't everyone can be as good as Saotome Ranma!"

>
Beside him, Ryoga snickered. "You didn't even notice the fact that she thinks you're great because you turn into a girl. Some tough warrior that makes you."

>
"Oh, yeah? You want to back that up?"

>
Hotaru looked up at Ryoga and blinked a couple of times. "Oh... I understand. You wish you could turn into something with cold water like Ranma-san. Don't worry, Ryoga-san. I'm sure you'll be OK even if you have to fight as a boy."

>
Now it was Ranma's turn to smirk at Ryoga's distress. How do you tell a twelve-year-old girl that you turn into a cute little pig? How do you tell her that you had been using that form for so long to be close to the one woman you loved, a woman who was now dead?

>
Hotaru in turn was looking at Ranma again, and in her sight, rose gardens seemed to burst into bloom all around him. Ranma-san was so kind. He probably knew that Ryoga wished he could change into a girl like Ranma-san. All the heroes in her manga were girls, and Ranma-san must be so happy that he could be act like a proper magical girl and save the world with her.

>
Ranma was just beginning to feel the habitual nervous twitch he had developed from overly attentive and adoring fiancées when a familiar voice rang out through the Tendo compound. "Hey, Ran-chan! Is this Kasumi's cousin or something?"

>
Kasumi turned at the sound of her name and beamed in greeting. "Oh! Hello, Ukyo. I'm sorry I don't have another glass for you out here. But you are welcome to join us for some iced-tea in a minute. May I introduce Hotaru? She will be staying with us for a while, and has a very interesting story to tell you..."

>

>End Of Chapter <p><p>

6. Souls Of Ice, Hearts Of Stone

> \

> | Vengeance And A Half |
 _____/

>
Thanks to my pre-readers:

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>
What has happened:

>The time travel of Prince Diamond and the Inner Senshi at the end of Sailor Moon R has caused a paradox. Now the Outer Senshi are awake, the Death Busters are active, and the Dark Moon Family are still trying to conquer the world. In a desperate bid to stop a Daimon from gaining her Heart Crystal, the Outer Senshi were responsible for

Akane's death. Now Nabiki and Genma are providing support for the growing team seeking to defeat the demons and the Senshi.

>After weeks of confusion regarding their real identities, the Outer Senshi are together. Michiru and Haruka have found that they are really the reincarnations of the defenders of the Moon Kingdom. Refusing to recognise Sailor Moon as the real Moon Princess due to her actions against them, the Outers have decided that the only course of action is to defeat all their enemies in Tokyo and create a new Moon Kingdom. Unfortunately, this also means removing the "traitorous" Inner Senshi, something the coldly calculating Sailor Uranus has no qualms about.

>For Ranma, every day his vengeance seems one step closer to being fulfilled. Both Shampoo and Ukyo intend to join him and Ryoga when next they fight. Add to that the assistance of little Tomoe Hotaru, the mysterious magic girl with allegedly unequalled power, and you have a force to make the strongest person quail in fear.

>
Part 5: Souls Of Ice, Hearts Of Stone

>=====

>Cologne sat concealed in a shadow on a roof. There should not have been enough room to hide a finch there, but her mastery of her tribe's martial skills was beyond compare, and something as basic as stealth was almost second nature to her.

>The subject of her gaze flickered across the grounds of the Tendo compound. She could hardly call it the Tendo Dojo anymore, since the dojo itself no longer existed. Suffice it to say, the cause of all of Cologne's pain, suffering and misery for the last year was running around the Tendo's yard, with no idea she was here watching. Oddly enough, this same person she watched was also the prime cause of everything interesting in the last year. By her age, something interesting was worth more than gold.

>For any ordinary mortal, especially a man, to cause a Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku this level of general disquiet was unheard of. Any man that bothered someone of their importance and power should have been on a short trip to a new home six feet underground. This man was special. This was the man that her great-granddaughter wanted, and Cologne could hardly deny the girl anything.

>Although Cologne went to pains to be the best possible guardian of the child, there were many things that she let slip. Shampoo's training had been one of them, most obviously. Cologne blamed herself, not Shampoo for the fact that Ranma had beaten the girl so quickly and easily when Ranma had first entered the Joketsuzoku village. An embarrassment to the student was a greater shame upon the teacher, especially when Shampoo had been so greatly lauded to the rest of the village.

>Once they had reached Japan, Cologne had been more than willing to assist Shampoo in her quest for the boy. Initially, she had not seen what Shampoo had; she had not realised the untapped potential within the boy. When she had first trained him in the Chestnut Fist, she had not truly expected Ranma to learn it, let alone learn it in just a few days. That had been her first mistake. Her second mistake had been in assuming that Ranma was constrained by the same rules that held everyone else. Ranma was someone who could never be constrained by any _normal_ rules.

>Not that she had any intention of informing Ranma of some of the particular rules that she had been thinking of recently. Like all well written rules or guarantees, the Joketsuzoku marriage laws had a time limit written into them. If the woman had not married the man

within six months, the marriage was no longer an obligation. Optional, yes. Mandatory, no. After all, if the man had eluded pursuit, you would hardly wish to lose a valued woman who was eternally off on a quest to find him.

>In truth, if she or Shampoo wished it, they could have packed up and returned to the village almost a month ago, but they did not want to. Ranma was too great a prize for them to lose. Both Shampoo and the village as a whole would benefit when the boy was brought in. For that matter, Ranma himself might even benefit.

>Watching the intense, focused way that Ranma went about his training, Cologne wondered whether there was still a chance for her great granddaughter to win the boy's heart. The form flickering lightly through the yard was so... determined. The way he concentrated, the way he only lived for the art and for fighting the demons and Senshi; these things told of a man with only space for one thing in his heart: vengeance.

>Ranma had always been dedicated to the art and to his friends, but never to this extent. Literally everything that was not necessary to victory had been pushed to the side. School, trips to Ucchan's or the Nekohanten, all fell by the wayside. Cologne had seen enough people to understand that would not have happened if there was still someone truly important in Ranma's life. If the Kuonji girl had died, Ranma would have been sad and angry, but his lust for justice would not have been as strong.

>All this spoke of one thing to Cologne, and it made her wonder if she was right to stay in Japan and try to help Shampoo. While Akane's death may have made space in Ranma's heart for another, that space would be a long time coming available. For now... For now, Ranma would live with his memories, and Akane would be the next thing to perfect. In the pursuit for justice, he would forget the fights and insults that she levelled against him. Now, Akane would only seem better and better as every day went past.

>Realising the fact that Ranma was obsessed, any romance could be considered a closed issue for months if not years. Cologne seriously considered hopping off the roof and going home but, once again, Ranma stopped her.

>Having completed his training in his stronger boy form, Ranma had voluntarily jumped into the Koi pond and changed sex. Now, as a slight looking redhead, Ranma was performing more feats. As she watched Ranma leap from one rock, tumble in the air, perform an Amaguriken punching attack at an imaginary opponent, then land cleanly on the other side of the pool, Cologne sighed.

>This was why she could not leave. This was why she would not abandon the pursuit of Ranma until his was married to someone. Anyone that could do what she had just seen was more than a prize, they were a legend in the making. Few people attained the ability to perform the Amazon's legendary high speed punching attack. Fewer still could jump and move like Ranma. He (or she) could do both, at the same time.

>At the moment, Cologne was not sure she could name anyone in her village that could have performed that move, herself included. You lost a lot of power to your blows doing them in mid-air like that, but the move, the coordination, the skill and speed required were quite daunting.

>You did not come across a gem like Saotome Ranma twice in your life, even if you lived to three hundred. Equally, a gem is not found in such a perfect form. It must be polished, shaped and refined until each facet sparkles. Despite all of Ranma's incredible achievements, he was only sixteen years old. That mean the polishing had only begun, and it beggared the mind to imagine what he could do by the

time he was twenty-five if she was his teacher.

>No... There would be no giving up on this boy. She would stay here as long as it took, and then longer than that perhaps. If Shampoo's interest faded, Cologne would find another from the village. She would find a dozen, if that was what it took. Even if he did not marry Shampoo, she would take it as a personal mission to make him a member of their tribe in some way, or its ally if all else failed. A boy like this would go far, become truly powerful.

>Perhaps even powerful enough to defeat a nigh-omnipotent god like Saffron, lord of Phoenix Mountain.

>* * *

>"Could you please repeat that?"

>"I SAID..." The words were drowned out by the repeated hammering of a carpenter above them. When that noise ended, Tomoe looked around briefly, opened his mouth to start speaking, and then closed it again when a rip saw started sizing some new floor boards.

>"Never mind. Come on, I'll tell you outside."

>Once out of the Tomoe house - such as it was - the noise level dropped considerably. Just down the street, there was space for them to sit and talk in the shade. At least, Tomoe Souichi sat. Mimete declined with a roll of her eyes and a twirl of her staff.

>"Right... Now where were we?"

>"You were about to tell me how you had promoted me above those other fools and put me in charge of the Witches 5?" Although Mimete tried to sound innocent and unassuming, she could not quite manage it while trying to subvert the power of her sisters-in-evil.

>"Oddly enough, you are almost right." Souichi's artificial eye glinted as he smiled.

>"W-W-What?"

>"Due to certain... Unforeseen events, I shall be placing you in charge of seeking the Talismans."

>"I will?!" Earnestly, Mimete clasped her hands beneath her chin and looked at her master with shimmering eyes. This had been her dream since the Witches 5 had been formed. Finally, she would be the one in charge. She would be the one calling the shots. With this opportunity, she would not fail. She would show Kaolinite, Tellu and all the other Witches who was the best now.

>"Indeed. As of now, it is your mission to secure the three Talismans that Mistress 9 needs. You, and you alone shall be responsible for them."

>"Of course, Tomoe-sensei. I will not fail you."

>The leader of the Death Busters - the evil force dedicated to summoning Master Pharaoh 90 and bringing the Silence to the Earth - nodded slowly and locked his eyes with his subordinate. "Succeed, and you shall be rewarded, Mimete. Mistress 9 remembers those who have served her well. But be warned... Her tolerance for failure is far less than mine, and much as you fear my anger, her wrath is a thousand times worse. You alone now bear the responsibility for finding and retrieving the Talismans necessary to create the Holy Grail."

>Sobered by his tone, but only slightly, Mimete nodded. Her eyes still glowing with excitement, she sought details on where her erstwhile allies had failed. If she could avoid their mistakes, she would have even more advantage over their enemies. "What happened to Kaolinite and Eudial?"

>"Kaolinite suffered an... accident... in the course of her duties. You will not be hearing from her again."

>"An accident? Does that have anything to do with why you're rebuilding your home?"

>Tomoe smiled. "Indeed. It would appear that my errant daughter is one of the Sailor Senshi. She and I had a slight disagreement and look what happened. Children these days. They just have no respect for your property."

>Looking back over her shoulder, Mimete blinked a couple of times. Tomoe-sensei's daughter did that? The entire upper section of the house was gone. Mimete did not know what sort of attack the girl had, but she did not want to go up against her in combat if that was any indication. Even at its most powerful, Mimete's Charm Buster would not be capable of doing such damage.

>Worse still, there were none of the signs she would have expected from a major fight. Whatever Tomoe Hotaru had used must have eliminated Kaolinite faster than Mimete could possibly have managed in a direct fight. No matter what else, that girl was dangerous, and that was vital to know. Talismans or no talismans, Mimete knew which direction she would run the next time she saw the pale, unassuming face of Tomoe's daughter: away

>"That still doesn't explain why you are rebuilding your house."

>"A lure. Nothing more. Hotaru-chan is still important to my plan, possibly even more so now that she has revealed this power. She is a small, sick little girl, all alone in Tokyo. The school and this house are the only things she knows and will feel safe with. Should she return and find the house restored to its original state she will be off guard, vulnerable. When that happens..."

>"She will be ours." Mimete finished for him.

>"Exactly."

>"And what of Eudial? What happened to her?"

>"Nothing. Eudial has been given another task." Tomoe could not help but smile as he saw Mimete curse quietly and stamp one foot. "While I expect you to be capable of handling those meddling Sailor Senshi, there is another group to worry about. Stronger and better organised, we must ensure that they do not triumph before Mistress 9 is awakened. Once she is on our side, surely we cannot fail."

>"So... So Eudial has been given something more important than me?"

>"Stop snivelling! Your responsibility is the Talismans. First and last, that is all you should be concerned with. Eudial is not your worry, and you are not in some competition with her. All that matters is you both serve Mistress 9 to the fullest of your abilities. Only when we are victorious will you be suitably rewarded for your services."

>"Yes, sir. I understand."

>"Good. Now, be about your work. I have to return and supervise this construction. I swear, if those workers have gotten sawdust in my beakers again, I'll have someone's guts for garters!"

>Mimete stood still for several long moments as her master walked away. When he was back inside the skeleton of the house that had been erected, she finally released her control and began hopping around. Dancing from foot to foot, Mimete sung a mindless little tune, gloating in her good fortune and rejoicing in all of the gifts she was already sure she would receive. She was much prettier than the other Witches, there was no way that she could fail.

>So long as she stayed away from Tomoe-sensei's daughter. She had not met her, but already she frightened the Witch.

>Turning to begin the search for the Talismans, Mimete's smile grew even fuller. Just because she had been told not to worry about Eudial's job, there was no reason she could not visit her. Mimete knew her job was much more important. So it was really in

everyone's best interest if she made sure that Eudial failed somehow. After all, if both Eudial and Mimete succeeded, then they would have to share the rewards. It would be much better for Mistress 9 if she only had to be grateful to Mimete. And Eudial was always so grumpy, too.

>With a laugh and a spring in her step, Mimete bounded down the Tokyo streets. Soon, victory would be hers, and hers alone!

>* * *

>"What are you doing here?"

>The question could have come from either of them, but this time Ukyo managed to get the drop on her adversary and asked first.

>"Shampoo here to help Airen. Show Airen the _real_ reason he marry Amazon wife. Why you here?"

>"_I'm_ Ranchan's fiancée. I didn't try and trap him with some silly laws, he loves _me_!" Tossing her hair back over her shoulder, Ukyo gave Shampoo a sidelong glance. "Besides, I'm just doing what any good fiancée would do, helping him when he needs a hand. Showing him how much a real fiancée cares, not like..."

>Ukyo trailed off and looked around guiltily. For so many months, she had become ingrained to the idea of comparing herself against Akane, she just slipped into the habit. Now that she was no longer here, it was just her and Shampoo. Although Ukyo always knew who Ranma would pick, she felt bad about what she had almost said about Akane. Akane might have treated Ranma terribly, but there was no reason to keep bringing it up.

>"Let's just say that I'm acting like Ranchan's cute fiancée should act. Are you here to deliver ramen or something?"

>"No, Shampoo here fight by Airen's side. Amazon wife not just good cook and great body. She best fighter. Shampoo trained with Great-Grandmother. Great-Grandmother teach Shampoo everything she need know. Shampoo protect Airen in battle."

>Giving a grudging nod, Ukyo had to acknowledge that. Shampoo might be a bit of a bimbo, but she did have her heart in the right place. Grimacing, she leaned in closer to the purple haired Amazon. "I don't suppose Granny would be interested in coming here and training me? I've got that that idiot Genma training me. If he had half a spine he might be a decent fighter, but, gods, I can't understand how Ranchan had stayed with him so long."

>"Shampoo understand. Panda-man bad for Airen." She lowered her brows. "Panda-man probably get Airen killed. Airen should be trained with Great-Grandmother. Nothing better than Amazon techniques."

>"Try telling Ranchan that. I love him, but he can be so thick some times. Why can't he see how bad that father of his is? Maybe... Maybe if we both work on it, we could convince him to move out and leave his father. He could stay at my place, I've got plenty of space."

>"No. Ranma Shampoo's Airen. He stay with Shampoo and Great-Grandmother. We teach everything he need know."

>"I'll bet. You'll just brainwash him and run away with him. I'd rather he stays here with his idiot father than let that happen."

>There was silence for a moment. "Do you think... Do you think you could convince Granny to come here and train us all?"

>It was a big concession for Ukyo, voluntarily offering a way for her rival to spend even more time with Ranma, but it would be worth it. She was not sure what training Ranma was doing with his father, since he refused to let her see it. Unfortunately, that just worried her more. If Ranma did not want her to know what his father was doing for

training, that probably meant that it was something that defined new bounds for the words "unreasonable", "dangerous" and "incredibly stupid".

>Ukyo did not necessarily trust Shampoo or Cologne with her fiancée, but she did trust them with his general well being. Cologne would no more expose Ranma to a dangerous learning technique than she would Shampoo. Genma, on the other hand, would probably start dropping Ranma out of Tokyo Tower to teach him to fly unless someone kept a rein on him in.

>"Shampoo think that good idea. Shampoo stay here too. Keep Airen warm at night."

>"I don't think that's such a good idea. Do you think you could just be a little subtle for a while? _I_ know Ranchan is going to choose me eventually, but I don't want to rush him. It's pretty clear he must have at least liked Akane a little, because he seems torn up about it. I just don't want to rush him or anything."

>Slowly Shampoo nodded and shifted her grip on her bonbori.

"Shampoo... Understand. Shampoo no say anything. Shampoo act as warrior. Help defend Airen in battle."

>In many ways, Ukyo felt sorry for Shampoo. Obviously she cared deeply for Ranma, but Ukyo knew that there was no way Ranma would choose the Chinese girl. She wished that Shampoo would just accept that Ukyo was destined to be with Ranma. It would be much simpler for everyone, and it would save Shampoo the heartache of rejection in the end.

>Despite the fact that she would have preferred it if Shampoo was not trying to capitalise on her own good idea of staying around Ranma the one time he truly needed them, she would not try and dissuade her. She had never met the Senshi personally, but the thought of anyone capable of taking on Ranma and Ryoga at the same time and winning was something to worry about. In that case, every pair of hands they had was worth gold.

>Besides, the sooner they defeated the Senshi, the sooner she could settle down with her fiancée and help him to build new happy memories and get past the death of his friend.

>The girls did not have much longer to wait before the object of their attention came out of the house. Following close behind him was Ryoga, who was glowering at Ranma's back. "Sorry, Ucchan, didn't mean to keep you waiting, but P... Ryoga here almost got lost on the way out of the bathroom. I had to rescue him."

>Ryoga fumed for a moment, but he did not seem to have a good counter to the accusation. Seeking a way to divert attention from himself, Ryoga nodded to Shampoo. "Hey. When I didn't see you for a few days, I was worried that Ranma had scared you off."

>"Shampoo never scared of Airen. Shampoo train with Great Grandmother. Now she fight with Airen. Help defeat evil."

>Both the boys nodded. There was not much they could say against that. Other than themselves, people seemed to be fairly defenceless against the growing reign of terror that had Tokyo in its grip. "It's good to see you again, Shampoo. The Old Ghoul came over the other day, being annoying like usual, but it was nice to see some familiar faces."

>"I know what you mean, Ranchan. If it wasn't for my restaurant I would never get to see anyone. Other than running around the city at night, have you even been outside recently? No-one has seen you at school recently."

>Ranma shook his head in negation. "Nah. It just didn't seem important anymore. Not that it ever was. Besides, if Ryoga can get away with wandering around the country his whole life and never finding school, I figure I can get away with it for a while."

>"Well, don't leave it too long. You don't want to miss out on an education." Ukyo countered.

>"Humph. Not like that matters. School ain't gunna help me run a dojo."

>"Come join Amazons. No need for school. Ranma be what Ranma is."

>Worried that Shampoo might be able to tempt him away with such an appealing offer, Ukyo quickly put in her own two cents. "Oh, but you wouldn't need to worry about that sort of thing anyway. I could support us both just fine with my restaurant."

>Ranma's brows lowered. This was not really what he had intended when he had invited the girls with him to fight the demons. "Look. I'll finish school and all, I'll just do it in my time. And I ain't interested in any of that sort of thing at the moment, OK? All I'm thinking about is fighting, and that's all you should think about too. Right, Ryoga?"

>The lost boy grunted assent. Although he had mixed feelings about letting people as weak as Ukyo and Shampoo fight with them against the demons, he could not find any flaw in the logic that stated that four against five were better odds when fighting the Senshi. It was somehow disturbing to considered that it was Saotome's womanising ways that had caused him so much grief in the past, but it was that same effect that had now netted him two more of Nerima's strongest as allies in the fight against darkness.

>"Aiya! Shampoo no think Airen have sister! She grow up, make good Amazon, yes?"

>Looking around, Ranma and Ryoga spotted Hotaru coming out of the front of the house. She was wearing her school uniform still, since she did not possess any other clothes. At least by now Kasumi had cleaned and mended the worst of it. Giving a groan, Ryoga smacked Ranma around the back of his head. "You idiot! We were supposed to head off early so she didn't try to follow us. But noooo, you had to stand around talking with your girlfriends. Now what are you going to do?"

>"Shut up, Ryoga. I'll just tell her she can't come."

>Coming to a stop near the group of martial artists, Hotaru looked up at the collection. Could these be real magical girls? Maybe Ranma-san was helping them... Or maybe, since Ranma-san was so good, they were the ones helping him. Giving a bow, she smiled up at them. "Hello. I'm Tomoe Hotaru."

>"Not Airen's sister?" Shampoo asked in puzzlement.

>Simultaneously, Ukyo turned to Ranma with a dangerous look in her eye and a hand on her battle spatula. "She'd better not be another fiancée, Ranchan."

>"No, no, no, no. She's just a friend, that's it. Hotaru wants to help fight the demons and stuff. She said her dad was taken over by one. That's why she's staying here."

>Giving the young girl a sceptical look, Ukyo released her weapon. "Isn't she a little... Young?"

>Vigorously, Hotaru shook her head. "No, I'm not too young, honestly. I've got to come with you because I'm the most powerful magical girl in the whole world." Giving a slightly nervous look at her idol, she continued in a quieter, slightly embarrassed voice. "I'm even more powerful than Ranma-san."

>Shampoo squatted down in front of the timid, fragile looking girl and poked a single finger into her forehead. "Little Girl no look strong."

>Slightly nervous, since the purple haired Amazon was much larger,

and quite obviously armed, Hotaru clasped her hands in front and defied the assessment. "Mouu... I am powerful. I just can't use it without hurting people. But that's no reason to poke me and be mean."

>Leaning over next to Shampoo, Ukyo gave a winning smile. "Sorry, Sugar. We just don't want you to get hurt. I'm Ukyo, and that's Shampoo. I'm not sure about you, but we've both been training since we were really little. Are you sure you're going to keep up?"

>"Well... Not like this, but if I change I can."

>"Change?"

>Giving an earnest nod, Hotaru held up her transformation pen. "See, it's magic. I can use this and get all sorts of really amazing magical powers."

>Looking sideways, Ukyo asked with doubt in her voice. "Is she serious, Ranchan? Can she really do magic?"

>To everyone's surprise, it was Shampoo that answered. "Shampoo believe Little Girl. Great Grandmother knows much magic, have many magic things. It make her too too powerful even if she no know martial arts. If Little Girl have magic wand, maybe she have magic too."

>"How about this, Sugar. Since it's going to be pretty dangerous out there, do you want to let me take it? If you teach me how to use it, I could take your place. That way you could stay here nice and safe and leave the fighting to us bigger girls... And the guys too, of course. I wouldn't forget you, Ranchan."

>Hotaru shrugged and held out the Henshin stick. "You can try. It won't work for you, but you can try."

>Taking the blue stick gently as though it might break, Ukyo held her breath. After a few moments when she did not feel any different, she spoke. "Umm... Am I supposed to do something to make it work?"

>"Hold it up and say: 'Saturn eternal power, make up'. But it won't work for you."

>Doing as she was told, Ukyo straightened and - feeling rather foolish - said the requisite phrase. For many long seconds, everyone stood there watching her, until she lowered the Henshin stick. Face burning red from embarrassment, she handed the rod back to the girl. "Boy! Do I feel silly after that!"

>Taking the object, Hotaru immediately felt better. She had thought that Ukyo could not use it, but somehow she felt better once she was sure. She was right, she was special. Just as special as Ranma-san, in her own way.

>Capitalising on the lull while Ukyo was still standing there feeling silly and looking as red as Ranma's shirt, Hotaru held up the stick. "SATURN ETERNAL POWER! MAKE UP!"

>Bright, glorious light surrounded her, and Hotaru felt the majesty of her transformation. When she finished, Hotaru struck her special, magical girl pose at the end, feeling everyone's eyes on her. With a slight blush to her face, Hotaru felt so proud. This magic made her their equal. Her magic made her stronger than everyone there, and only she knew it. Besides that, she really liked her magical uniform. The whole dark skirt and boots made her look so grown up, but at the same time, the bows and wings looked so cute. If she was not trying to be serious and impress Ranma-san's friends, she would have giggled with excitement.

>Squinting her eyes slightly, Shampoo concentrated on the transformed girl in front of her. "I no feel strong Ki. She still just little girl. How you strong?"

>"Well... I've got two really strong attacks, and I can sense evil,

and I can fly, and I can---"

>"Hotaru..." Ranma spoke softly. Stopping in mid stream, the small black haired girl turned and looked up at her idol. "Hotaru, I... I'm worried about you. What if we can't protect you? What if we need to run to help someone, or even run away. I don't want to, but... But just in case..."

>"But... But, Ranma-san! I'm supposed to help you. That's why I'm a magical girl, I'm sure of it. Honestly. I won't be a burden to you. I'm much fitter like this. I could run all the way down the street if I needed to."

>Hearing that stabbed into Ranma's heart more than anything else Hotaru had said to him. He knew she was sick, she had told him as much before, but he never realised just how badly off she was. When a young girl her age thought it was a big deal to be able to run a few hundred metres, you knew there was trouble.

>Getting down on his knees in front of her, Ranma looked up at the sad little face. "Hotaru... Please... Remember when Ucchan first came here? I said she needed training before she could come with me. I guess... I guess what I'm saying is that I think you need some training too. Please, Hotaru... None of us want you to get hurt..."

>Looking thoroughly downcast, Hotaru turned away slightly. "I understand, Ranma-san. You don't want me around."

>"No! No, Hotaru, that's not it. I'm just... I'm just worried about you, is all. Come on, I promise I'll help you get better so that you can help us in the future."

>Hotaru put away the Silence Glaive that had been summoned to her as part of her transformation. Locking her hands together in front of her, she turned back and looked into Ranma's blue eyes. Searching them for any sign of deceit, she thought about what he had said. What he meant was when he thought she was strong enough, well enough, he would take her with them. He had said it, and she believed him. Her Ranma-san would never try and deceive her.

>Throwing her arms around Ranma's neck, Hotaru gave him a big hug. "OK, Ranma-san. I'll be good. Once you think I'm ready, then I'll come with you."

>Feeling the tension in the air behind and beside him, Ranma quickly detached himself from the little magical girl. Getting cuddles from a girl in a skin tight suit and short skirt was a quick way to a lot of pain if done in the presence of Ukyo or Shampoo. At least they were willing to wait and let the anger grow, unlike certain tomboys.

>With that thought in mind, Ranma stood and looked around, face serious and intent. "Come on. The evening is getting away, and neither the Senshi, the demons nor the witches are going to wait for us."

>"Ranma-san!"

>Dramatic and determined exit broken, Ranma looked back. "Yes, Hotaru?"

>Holding up a small container of water, she looked at him.

"Kasumi-neechan told me you were planning on changing before you left. That was why I brought this out in the first place."

>Smacking his own head in disgust at his lack of memory, Ranma nodded and then splashed himself with cold water.

>"Right! Let's do it this time!" The short, intense, redhead pushed her damp bangs back and stalked out the front gate of the Tendo compound. Her pants and shirt were too loose and too large, but they always were after a transformation. With speed born of habit, she had them almost adjusted by the time everyone in the party followed

her.

>Outside the gate, another voice brought the redhead to a halt. Feeling frustrated and irritated, Ranma slowly turned and looked up at the tall Chinese boy leaning nonchalantly against a utility pole.

"What do you want Mousse?"

>Looking down at the short buxom girl that led the team of four, Mousse let the evening sunlight reflect dramatically off his glasses for an instant. "I am here for my darling Shampoo."

>"Shampoo busy, Stupid Mousse. You go home."

>"No! I would never abandon you, Shampoo. Saotome... You know me. I never hated Akane. I would never have let something like this happen if I could have stopped it. Personally, I would rather be back in China with Shampoo by my side, but if she is here, then that is my place too. Please, Saotome. Let me fight beside you so that I can keep my darling Shampoo safe."

>"Amazon woman no need protecting by stupid male. Go home to Great Grandmother, Mousse."

>Before Shampoo could brain Mousse with her bonbori and take him out of the fight, Ranma held up a small hand and stopped her. She could feel his sincerity, and she could understand his need. If Ranma had been around when that demon and the Senshi had attacked Nabiki and Akane, Akane might still be alive today. He may be dead, but that did not matter. He would have done anything to save them, and he knew that Mousse felt the same way about Shampoo.

>Unlike Hotaru, Mousse would not listen to reason. Also, Mousse was a damn good fighter - again unlike Hotaru. Mousse could take care of himself, and if Shampoo was hurt and they needed to escape from the Senshi, Ranma knew he could count on the half blind boy to do that perfectly. The only risk of taking Mousse was his bad eyesight, but he had already guessed that would be Ranma's price of admission to the growing team. When Mousse was waiting, he had been wearing his glasses, and Ranma knew without asking that Mousse would continue to wear them.

>"All right, Mousse, you're hired. Now we've got five, and they've got five. But this time, they know we're coming."

>The stern, sombre group of teenagers began a jog down the street. As with all battles, there was a chance they might not return, but they were doing what was right, and that made a difference. Not only that, but they were all friends, and loyal to each other. If there was a way to fight through a problem, there would be someone in the team that could do it.

>With eyes shimmering, Hotaru watched the team of heroes go. Ahh... Ranma-san. Now there was a real hero. So handsome and strong as a boy, he was everything her manga said a real man should be. But as a girl... Hotaru sighed, and wished she could be half as cool as Ranma-san was. Even when she was using her magic, Hotaru knew that Ranma-san was much faster and tougher than she was. She was pretty, and smart and strong and... and... and Hotaru was sure that Ranma-san was everything a real magical girl should be.

>That was why Hotaru could not disappoint her. That was why she needed to prove to Ranma-san that she was good enough to be a magical girl and help defend Tokyo with her. She knew that she would never be as fit and strong as Ranma-san. If she needed to train and wait for that to happen, she would never get a chance to help. The only way to prove to Ranma-san that she should join them was to act like a real magical girl.

>Turning away from the front gate, Hotaru ran to the side of the Tendo's yard. She might not be able to jump like Ranma-san, but a low wall like this one was no obstacle at all... If you could fly.

>With just a few flaps of the white, fragile looking wings on her back, Hotaru was over the wall and on the street beyond it. Looking around to make sure that Ranma-san did not spot her and ask her to stay home, she smiled. Bringing out the Silence Glaive once more, Hotaru set off down a street at random. Tomoe Hotaru, magical girl supreme, was about to prove to Ranma-san, her friends, and all the baddies in Tokyo just how ready she was.

>* * *

>Makoto could never say what made her look up just at that moment. Fate? Destiny? Bad luck? Any or all of these perhaps. But with a slight turn of her neck, the fate of the world shifted.

>She had been having a bad day. More accurately, the last couple of weeks had been pretty bad. Everyone she knew aside from the Senshi turned away from her as a pariah, making her world seem small and lonely. Even Makoti at the Crown arcade did not want to speak to her; she gathered there had been some sort of 'incident' in then store between her, Usagi and Ami. The girls were working on patching things up whenever they found problems like this, but there was only so much that they could do immediately.

>Not having a school to go to, and not having friends to hang out with made each day long and boring. In an attempt to cure her boredom and keep up to date with what her friends were doing, Makoto had resorted to borrowing a text book from Ami and reading it in the park. Naturally enough, since it was a current text for school, Ami did not need it, she had already moved onto the next book in the series so she could stay ahead.

>Reading had been dull, and at this time of the evening, most of the office workers had gone home, making the street quiet as she sat there. Had she kept her head buried for just a few moments longer, she would have missed the girl walking down the street. Ten more seconds, and she would have been blocked from view by the large weeping cherry tree near the entrance to the park. As it was, Kino Makoto had plenty of time to appreciate just who she was seeing, and to recognise the danger that Luna had described to them.

>Blue skirt, knee high blue boots, and deep, dark, blood red bows. There could be only one person dressed like that; the infamous Senshi of Destruction: Sailor Saturn.

>A single touch brought her communicator alive, and a few short sentences guaranteed that she would soon have reinforcements. Makoto was not sure what they would do once they go here, but she knew that she did not fancy facing Sailor Saturn by herself. If Luna's description was even half right, the girl was dangerous to be around, and just having her in the city was a risk to everyone.

>Transformed and shadowing the small girl, Sailor Jupiter was struck by both how young she was, and how carefree she seemed. She looked more mature than Chibi-Usa normally did, but not by a great deal. Certainly she was younger than any of the Inner Senshi, which made her much younger than the other Outer Senshi. Jupiter wondered if there was any reasoning behind that. The most powerful Senshi was also the youngest, but other than that, it seemed that the older the Senshi was, the more powerful she became.

>As the other Senshi arrived in quick succession, Jupiter felt more confident. No matter what happened now, they would do it as a team; and as a team they almost never lost. True, there was the occasional time where they had suffered a setback, but together they were at their best.

>"Well, Sailor Moon, what do you think?"

>"Umm...."

>Luna was quick to jump into the void created by Moon's

indecisiveness. "Your Majesty, I hate to suggest something like this, but you have to think of the betterment of everyone. Sailor Saturn is too dangerous. Even if she doesn't deliberately hurt someone, her attacks are just to... arbitrary. Imagine what would happen if she cast her Death Reborn Revolution! Can you risk it? Can you honestly?"

>Looking stricken, Sailor Moon gnawed on a gloved finger for a moment. "N-No... I can't do it! She's supposed to be one of my Senshi. I can't just attack her because she's too strong."

>"But Your Majesty... It's not just that. Can't you remember what it was like back in the Moon Kingdom? She was just a child then, and she still is now. All she wants to do is play with that power. She's like a child with a shot gun. For the sake of people in the city, if nothing else, you have to do something."

>Sailors Mars and Jupiter looked like they were ready to follow the cat's advice. If one of them were in charge, no doubt the Senshi would be confronting that poor girl at the moment. To protect Tokyo and everyone in it, would they really need to attack Sailor Saturn? Wouldn't that make them the same as the Outers? Wouldn't that make them as bad as the people they were trying to stop?

>"Luna... I'm sorry... I can't do it. I have to try and help her first. I have to try and make her better, try to remove this disregard for human life."

>Gripping the Moon Wand in her hand, Sailor Moon stepped out into the street, followed by a phalanx of Senshi. Sailor Saturn was a short distance away from them, but still entirely close enough for what she had planned.

>Bringing up the Wand, sunlight glittered off the Silver Imperium Crystal that was located at the base of the crescent moon adorning the top of the Wand. Calling out to get the girl's attention, Sailor Moon prepared to begin their evening's work. "Sailor Saturn!"

>The subject of the call did not respond until Mars yelled hotly. "Hey, you! Turn around when Sailor Moon talks to you!"

>Starting guiltily, the young girl turned back and looked at them with guileless eyes. Perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of instinct, or maybe as a preparation to attack, the girl suddenly revealed a massive weapon. Fearing the worst, Sailor Moon reacted before Luna's dire warnings could become true.

>"MOON... HEALING... ESCALATION!"

>As shining white motes of light floated out towards Sailor Saturn, a glowing crescent moon shape also left the Moon Wand. Designed to free people from evil and cure them of their ills, Sailor Moon valued this, her second attack, as her favourite. Her other attacks might be better at destroying demons and the forces of evil, but that could not compare to the feeling of helping someone. If things went well, soon Sailor Saturn would be cured of her uncaring and deadly ways. With Sailor Moon's help, the girl might be able to join them as a proper Senshi, fighting evil by moonlight.

>That was, if everything went well.

>Holding the Silence Glaive already, Hotaru's reaction was rapidly becoming instinctive. Whenever she met a group of magical girls, they would immediately begin attacking her. After her experience with the big girls, Hotaru was able to bring up the Silence Wall before the healing magic of the Moon Healing Escalation covered her.

>In a shower of golden sparkles, Sailor Moon's magic wasted itself against the impenetrable barrier that faced it. Behind the barrier erected by the big weapon, the little girl had changed. Gone was the

innocent, smiling, happy face they had seen initially. Now, she was frowning. In other circumstances, and preferably on someone less dangerous, the face would have been comical. Hotaru's big eyes were narrowed, and her eyebrows were drawn together in a frown that did not sit well with her normally happy expression.

>"Mouuuu... I've done it again. Ranma-san is going to be really mad at me when we get home. Maybe that was why she didn't want me coming. I can't even scare them all away without hurting lots of people.

Maybe... Maybe I can make a run for it..."

>The Sailors were shocked at what they had seen. A number of people had resisted Sailor Moon's Healing before, but no-one had simply blocked it like that. When they saw her face go from smiling to angry, and saw her grumbling to herself, the girls knew real fear. That was not the face of a person willing to forgive them, and they had just roused the sleeping beast that was the Senshi Of Destruction.

>"Um... Guys? Can you keep her busy? I need to try again! We can't just give up and try to kill her without at least giving it our best go."

>Nodding their heads, the other Sailors agreed and readied their attacks. Shortly, multicoloured magic was streaking at the girls sheltering behind the magical shield, ensuring she would not get the time she needed to attack them. None of the attacks were aimed directly at her - just in case they somehow got through - but they were all close enough that she would not be able to risk moving.

>As it happened, Hotaru was too scared by the horrible girls attacking her to even consider running any more. The instant that she moved, she would be cut down by their attacks, because she would not be able to keep up her Silence Wall.

>"OK, everyone... One more go... MOON... HEALING... ESCALATION!"

>This time, Sailor Moon concentrated and kept up the stream of healing magic. Time and again, the intense healing magic battered into the Silence Wall, seeking to overcome, to penetrate, to reach the vulnerable girl behind the magic. To bring her the cure that Sailor Moon so desperately wanted to give.

>Still sending out wave after wave of crescent shaped light, Sailor Moon spoke through clenched teeth. "Guys... I can't... get through... We've got to try... and weaken the barrier... together..."

>Nodding as one, the four remaining Inner Senshi changed their attacks, and dedicated their efforts to battering down the shield. Once it was down, they could stop, and Sailor Moon would be able to help the girl.

>What they did not expect was a group of very, very angry martial artists to descend out of thin air, landing around them with kicks, punches and righteous fury.

>Almost instantly, the attacks against Sailor Saturn let up, as the Senshi scrambled to protect their leader. While they were on equal numbers now - even outnumbered if you included Sailor Saturn - the Senshi were soldiers, and they reacted like that.

>Instantly ceasing their attacks and backing up to protect their leader, the girls stared with hate filled eyes at the boy and girl that had attacked them before. This time, those two were boosted by another three, two women and a man. To the Senshi's eyes, their attackers wore a mottled assortment of worn or ill fitting clothes. Rather than generals or senior minions they were used to fighting, this group looked like one of the dark forces had selected a group of teenagers off the street and corrupted them, filling them with their

dark powers.

>That explanation certainly seemed to be true when they attacked. Although the original two were the strongest, the others were far too fast to be normal humans. Only possession could account for the speed, strength and ferocity with which they attacked. That speed and strength was not enough against the Senshi this time, because the girls knew what they were expecting, and they were better organised. Rather than allowing themselves to be split off completely, they paired up and protected their princess as she continued to try to save Sailor Saturn.

>Venus and Mercury, the two weaker fighters, took on the new comers while Mars and Jupiter took on the leaders of the dark forces. Fighting a holding action against the two girls, Mercury took a moment to think that for a change, her side did not have the shortest skirts in the battle. The Chinese girl - although her red dress was very nice - actually showed more leg than the Senshi. Equally, the other girl with the funny looking weapon, whatever it was, at least wore leggings, since her dress was more of a long jacket than a real dress.

>While Mercury distracted the other two, Venus watched as the Chinese boy with the coke bottle glasses brought up the arms of his massive white robe and threw them forwards. Although she was shocked by the sheer weight of metal that came out of them, Venus did not let one of the chains come in contact with her as she nimbly cart-wheeled away. "You think that was good, China Boy? Try this! VENUS LOVE-ME CHAIN!"

>Placing a hand to her lips, Venus winked and drew a string of golden, glowing hearts forth. Waving the hand around her hips, she drew out a long string of the hearts, then threw them at the boy in white. With almost a mind of their own, the magical chain snaked out and around. Although he dodged on the first pass, the boy was obviously expecting her magic to act like a normal weapon, and was not expecting it when it came back, quickly and efficiently bundling him into a golden mummy.

>"Shampoo!" He cried, but no-one paid him any attention, since things were getting lively everywhere.

>Mercury - never the best at combat - had found herself on the retreat very rapidly. Although she was magically faster than her opponents, they seemed to have incredible skill and that made up the difference very quickly. Although Mercury could act quicker, both of the girls were armed, and seemed to know what they were going to do well in advance of Mercury. This led to the unfortunate Senshi receiving a nasty knock to the head by the big blunt weapon the brunette was carrying.

>Going down on one knee, Sailor Mercury looked up through pain blurred eyes. The purple haired girl with the refined, exotic features was bringing her large, mace-like weapons around for a telling blow. Despite the fact Mercury begged her legs to move, the ringing in her head made it all the harder, and she could tell that there was no way the bigger girl was going to miss this opening.

>No way she could miss, that was, until someone shouted "Mercury!" and a bolt of golden magic sailed over the blue haired girl's head and knocked the Chinese girl across the street with smoke coming off her. With anger in her eyes that made them sparkle like a clear blue ocean on a windy day, Sailor Moon strode forward towards the last standing person in the group.

>"That's my friend you hurt, you rotten person. For that, I'm going to turn you into moon dust!"

>Ukyo could only watch with a knowing dread as both the girls facing

her brought up their arms for an attack. Braced to move, and with her battle spatula ready as a shield, Ukyo felt a sickening certainty that she would not only be unable to dodge, but the heavy sheet metal of her weapon would barely slow their attacks.

>"VENUS CRESCENT BEAM!"
"MOON SCEPTRE ELIMINATION!"

>
Wincing, Ukyo braced herself, wishing that she had been brave enough to get the kiss from Ranma that she had always wanted. For now, surely this was the end.

>
The end, however, did not come. Timidly peeling open one of her tightly closed eyes, Ukyo looked at the flare of light as two magical attacks continued to burst almost a foot from her body. Blinking in confusion, she looked around, to spot a very determined little girl standing a few metres away. "H-Hotaru-chan? Is that you doing... whatever it is?"

>
"Uyko-san..." Her voice was strained. "Get Shampoo-san. Hurry! I can't hold them forever."

>
She was tempted to argue, tempted to say they would keep fighting, but the sight of the Sailor in blue regaining her feet and throwing even more magic their direction was enough to convince her. "RANCHAN! We've got to get out of here!"

>
With that, she turned and ran back to where Shampoo lay half buried in a shop wall. Her breathing was shallow, but it was there, and that was the main thing. Picking the Amazon up in her arms, Ukyo was in time to see Ranma and Ryoga execute a manoeuvre they had obviously practiced together.

>
Although they were significantly better fighters than their friends, Ranma and Ryoga had not been able to get the upper hand that they had been expecting. Last time they fought the Senshi, the girls had been hampered by the expectation that they would comply with normal human capabilities and behaviours. Now that Mars and Jupiter knew that was not true, they took their opponents much more seriously. Also, without the aid of complete surprise, they were not able to get the balance of the fight going in their direction.

>
Although Ryoga was tough, he was not quite as fast as either of the Senshi. Every time he tried to close with one of the girls, either of them would try and fry him in some way. He knew that electroshock therapy had long been considered the best cure for depression, but he had no interest in receiving their sort of medicine. Ever since he had begun changing into P-Chan, he had suffered a very real fear of being barbecued alive, and the black haired Senshi wanted to do that to him with a vengeance.

>
Burnt and singed, Ryoga was almost as far from a decent victory as he had been at the start of the fight. His two decent blows had staggered their targets, but the girls had recovered easily enough. True to form, Ranma had not been hit, showing that her speed training had worked, but she had done even less damage than Ryoga. The best that Ranma had managed to do was distract and beat the girls slightly, preventing her slower ally from taking worse damage.

>
When the call from Ukyo came, they realised it was time to put their escape plan into action. Without waiting for Ranma to confirm her readiness, Ryoga stuck his finger into the ground, calling "Bakusai Tenketsu!" as he destroyed a section of pavement.

>
Not close enough to seriously hurt the girls, it briefly forced them to cover their faces, and that was all Ranma needed. Aided by the blast, she flew forwards, ending with a forward roll right

between the two Senshi. Without looking up, Ranma caught herself on her hands, and promptly lashed out first with her right leg, then her left. She knew the blows would be too soft to hurt their foes, but they were perfectly positioned to make them fall.

>
While a red and a green Sailor fell to the ground in a flurry of arms and legs, Ranma sprang backwards into the expanding cloud of debris. For a brief instant, numbers were evened again, and the Senshi reacted on their instincts and training again. Rather than press the assault on their outnumbered foes that were outside Sailor Saturn's shield, Moon, Venus and Mercury quickly ran to their fallen friends, unaware that the massive explosion had not hurt them.

>
In the second their backs were turned and the attacks stopped, Ranma and Ryoga were moving again. "Ucchan! Run! Hotaru!"

>
No-one need to be told twice. Carrying the unconscious Shampoo, Ukyo ran off down the street, and Hotaru dropped the Silence Wall, allowing the most victorious of the martial artists through. Skidding to a stop in front of the black haired girl, Ranma looked down at her.

>
"Hotaru, do those wings work?" She asked hurriedly.

>
"Unn."

>
"Good! Fly up to the top of this building and start running. Don't stop until you get home. Understand? Ryoga! Grab Mousse and follow her. Don't let her out of your sight, I need you to protect them both."

>
"R-Ranma-san! What are you going to do?"

>
"I'm going to keep them busy for a while, and let you guys escape. Don't worry, I'll be right behind you. Go!"

>
Watching only long enough to marvel at the light looking way Hotaru floated free of the ground and turned towards the building, Ranma turned back to the battle. Ryoga would watch over Hotaru, she knew that. Ranma was also as sure that Hotaru would not be able to run off like she did sometimes and let Ryoga get lost. With Ucchan taking care of Shampoo, that meant all she needed to do was buy them some time.

>
With a grin on her face, the fiery redhead struck a combat pose with a low guard and legs spaced for easy running and looked at the aligned Senshi. Behind her, she could already feel Ryoga disappearing and felt relieved. 'Not long', she thought. 'I don't have to keep them here long for the others to be safe.'

>
"All right you chickens. Which one of you wants to be first?"

>
Four girls growled back at her, and the central one with the two long pony tails looked really mad as she pointed a finger at her. "My name is Sailor Moon. For attacking us without reason, and for serving the dark powers, I shall punish you in the name of the Moon!"

>
With a flick of her arms and a shuffle of her feet, Ranma changed into the 'Soft Tiger' stance. For use against stronger opponents, or when outnumbered, it focused on speed and throws rather than doing damage through blows. It also put the emphasis on movement and staying unhurt. The odds were bad, her enemies outnumbered her, each was almost as fast, and all of them were stronger and tougher than her girl form. Grinning with a song in her heart and lightning singing in her veins, Ranma gave a brief beckoning motion with her hand. "Come punish this, Sailor Girl!"

>
With that, she ran forwards and tried to see just how long she could keep them occupied. This was what she lived for. This was what

she had trained all her life for. Suddenly, the years on the road all seemed worthwhile. She was here, protecting her friends, saving countless people from these killers, and it all came down to her skill and her training. Ranma had never felt more alive in her life.

>
Running forwards, Ranma caught them flat footed, but they recovered quickly. A pair of quick grapples and a leg sweep saw Sailor Mercury on the ground, but Ranma was forced to retreat before a series of high, crescent kicks almost took her head off. The Senshi in orange was not very skilled, but with speed like hers, she did not need to be.

>
Her speed advantage was nothing like what she usually maintained over Ryoga, but it was enough for her to be able to circle the orange Senshi and begin grappling with the tall one in green, Sailor Jupiter. To her dismay, Ranma discovered that this girl did have some skill in the art. Nowhere near her own, of course, but with the magical boosting the Senshi received, it put Ranma at a disadvantage. The pair cycled through eight competing arm bars and throw grips before Ranma bounded away, leaving Mars cursing as her fire sailed underneath the redhead to impact on a completely innocent wall.

>
Jupiter made the mistake of trying to follow her into the air, and was quickly put down. She might have speed and some skill, but unless you could fly, you should assume you were outclassed by Ranma in the air. Anything Goes made a special exercise of mid-air combat, and few people could match them for the size and duration of their jumps, let alone the acrobatics and combat they were capable of during flight.

>
Doing a barrel roll to avoid a stream of frozen blue ice, Ranma let her foot reach out and clip the back of one girl's head. It would not have hurt much, but it was enough to allow Ranma to alter her flight and avoid the next magical attack coming at her. Bringing her legs together, the small martial artist let herself drop like a stone behind the leader of the attackers, the vaunted Sailor Moon.

>
A series of short rabbit punches to the girl's kidneys from behind brought the leader to her knees, but again Ranma was forced to retreat as Mars and Jupiter tried to corner her. She was tempted to continue and try to fight, but the sudden pain as a golden beam laid a line of flesh raw across her back changed her mind. She was doing well, no doubt at all, but she was not winning. Her attacks were insufficiently strong, and against those numbers, she would wear down much sooner than they would... Assuming magical girls could tire, that is.

>
A pair of back flips put Ranma on top of a cafÃ©. Pulling down an eyelid, she looked at the Senshi. "Biiiii-da! Can't even catch little old me? How are you expecting to take over Tokyo? Ha ha ha--- Urk!"

>
Carried backwards by the impact of the Shine Aqua Illusion, Ranma realised she should have paid more attention to fighting than to mocking. When she landed, she shook her head and listened carefully. The Senshi were coming, she could hear them running around on the street below. Grateful she was already in her girl form and not unexpectedly changed by the cold water attack, Ranma rolled to her feet and sprinted across to the next roof.

>
For three blocks she continued like this, only to suddenly stop and reverse course. With just a little luck, she used one mighty jump to cross a street full of Senshi and elude them. While her assailants thought they were still following her on the ground, she had really gotten behind them. Briefly she was tempted with the idea of launching a Shi Shi Hokodan into their backs, but from her last

fight, she was aware of how little that would accomplish. Better to leave now and return to the Tendos.

>
What she really needed was more training. Just a few months, and she knew she would be able to defeat them. The only problem was, she did not have months.

>
* * *

>
A low chorus of moans and groans filled the Tendo yard. Ranma and Shampoo sat on the back porch, while Ukyo, Mousse and Ryoga sparred in the back yard. Shampoo and Ranma had been the most seriously hurt, but even then it was nothing life threatening. Kasumi had just finished bandaging Shampoo's ribs, and confidently told them that the Amazon would be fine, with just some nasty bruising.

>
Ranma, unfortunately, had a straight line burn across the top of her back, cross almost at the base of her shoulder blades. A reminder of the fight from Sailor Venus' Crescent Beam, it was liable to leave a scar for the rest of her life. With her shirt off and her back turned so that Kasumi could sit on the edge of the porch behind her, Ranma waited with firmly pressed lips for the cold sting of the burn medicine.

>
"Oh dear, Ranma-kun. This looks quite nasty. Are you sure you don't want to see a doctor?"

>
"Nah, Kasumi. Nabiki said she needs all the money she can get to look for Akane's killers. I don't need to go spending it on something silly like this."

>
"I'm sure she wouldn't mind. This is the sort of thing that she had in mind."

>
"Yeah, but it ain't the sort of thing I wanted for it. Besides, a little pain will help remind me to be faster next time."

>
Standing beside the kitchen door Tomoe Hotaru, still in her Sailor suit, wept silent tears. It was all her fault. If she had not gone out, Ranma-san and Shampoo-san would not have been hurt. If she had not tried to be a real magical girl, her friends would still be all right. It was all her fault.

>
Looking down at her hands, Hotaru thought of all the humiliation and embarrassment that her power had caused her in the past. From the first time she had healed the skinned knee of a boy at school, everyone had laughed at her. She did not want that to happen here, but what else could she do? Ranma-san had been hurt because of her, and she was saying they could not even afford a doctor.

>
Blinking back more tears and clearing her big purple eyes slightly, Hotaru looked at her hands once more and set her mouth. She would do it. She would help Ranma-san, even if it meant that they laughed at her like all of the kids at her school. She owed Ranma-san that much and more for all she had done.

>
"K-Kasumi-nee-chan... Can I help?"

>
She had been going to decline, intending to put the expensive burn cream on herself, but the sight of Hotaru's distressed face softened her already kind heart more. Holding up the tube of cream, she invited Hotaru to sit in front of her. "Now, you only need to put this on fairly thinly."

>
When Kasumi gave her permission, Hotaru moved forwards and put her palms out, hovering just centimetres from Ranma's burnt skin. Closing her eyes to concentrate, Hotaru could feel Ranma's pain, could feel the damage to her skin. 'Get better,' she thought. 'Heal.'

>
Just about to correct the girl, Kasumi stopped with an open mouth when she saw the soft white glow emanating from her palms and

sinking into Ranma's skin. From someone else, that might have been cause for alarm, but Kasumi knew how much Hotaru doted on Ranma. When Ranma gave an unconscious moan of pleasure, Kasumi gave a gasp of amazement. The burnt skin all along Ranma's back was moving, changing colour from an angry red and black back to a normal soft pink. Blisters were deflating and vanishing.

>
Soon, the foot long burn was no more, the skin just slightly red. "Hotaru-chan... How did you do that?"

>
"I... I'm glad I was a magical girl at the time..." Said Hotaru in a very small voice, before soundlessly collapsing to one side. Kasumi grabbed for her, to prevent her head from hitting the hard ground off the porch, but again it was Ranma's incredible speed that reached her first. Holding the little girl in her arms, Ranma gave the half unconscious Hotaru a smile of thanks.

>
"Whatever that was, Hotaru... Thanks."

>
"It's... My special power. Even before I became a magical girl, I could heal things. I'm sorry, Ranma-san. I shouldn't have gone out there today. Please don't hate me."

>
"Oh, Hotaru, I don't hate you. We went out there to fight them, it's not your fault. Besides, see that girl over there with the big bad spatula?"

>
"Ukyo-san?"

>
"Yeah. Ucchan's my oldest buddy in the world. If it weren't for you being there, and doing that magic shield thingy, Ucchan might not be here now. How could I be mad at you? 'Specially after what you just did for me."

>
"But... You wanted me to wait until I had more training."

>
"Aww... Hotaru, that's just because I was worried about you. Come on, cheer up. You saved Ucchan, you even brought Ryoga home, and that's no mean feat. Besides, I think we all need more training. Give us a smile, and don't look so down, OK?"

>
Giving a small smile, Hotaru was still troubled. She had not been running long after they left the fight before she needed to stop. If it had just been her, she might have been captured again. Luckily, Mousse's magical chains had vanished about then, and Ryoga had been able to carry her on his shoulders. That was the real reason that she had been able to bring everyone home. Not through her skill or bravery like Ranma-san had shown when she had kept them safe, but through having other better than her helping. It made her feel so sad and useless.

>
Any further considerations were abruptly put aside as the cry of "Saotome!" rent the air. Spinning around, Ranma was suddenly very glad that she had caught Hotaru earlier and was still holding her. While Ranma did not have a sense of feminine modesty, having her shirt off around Kuno was a recipe for disaster.

>
"Ahh! Pig-Tailed Girl! Please, tell me it is not true. Say to the mighty Blue Thunder that what he has heard is a lie."

>
Hearing the Kendoist rant and rave was quite normal, but somehow his voice was different. It was distraught, filled with emotion other than the normal egotism. Taking a step back in case she needed to put Hotaru down and deal with the boy, Ranma asked cautiously. "Say what ain't true, Kuno?"

>
"I have heard such terrible, terrible news, it haunts the ears of even one so great as myself. Pig-Tailed Girl, I beg of you. Please, put an end to the rumours that torment me so!"

>
"What rumours, you idiot?! You ain't even told me yet."

>
"Although I had missed the fiery Tendo Akane at our

distinguished centre of education, I had believed that she had simply been spirited away by the evil Saotome Ranma. Soon, I thought, soon she would free herself of his nefarious clutches as she has always done in the past. It was a torment to my soul that I could not aid her, since even her mercenary sister was not there to direct me to her location, but I was behove to bestow the benefits of my wisdom and greatness upon the people of our institution."

>
There was silence as everyone tried to understand what was said. Leaning closer to her friend, Hotaru whispered in Ranma's ear. "Does he need medication? I could go and get some."

>
"Nah. All he needs is a couple of quick kicks to the head. Ain't nothing wrong with him unconsciousness wouldn't fix."

>
"As I, in my greatness, walked through the streets of our fair city, I came upon a common peasant, hawking their wares. Naturally, the person - a Miko I suspect - begged me to favour her with my custom, but I deferred. Ahh, it was at that time that I, Kuno Tatewaki, scion of the mighty House Kuno, heir to our family's legacy of wealth, power, intelligence and good looks, it was then that I heard the following:"

>
Kuno paused and fixed Ranma with a stare. Giving a slight giggle, Ranma shifted Hotaru to ensure nothing was showing. After suffering though the tale this long, she did not want Kuno to get distracted and have to start again.

>
"Tendo Akane is dead."

>
There was silence. Crickets chirped. After a time, even the crickets went quiet.

>
"Pig-Tailed Girl... You have not denied it."

>
Growing weary - of both Kuno and Hotaru's weight - Ranma set the small girl in the blue and white fuku on the ground. Standing behind her charge for modesty, Ranma kept a hand on each of Hotaru's shoulders and looked at Kuno.

>
She knew she could do it. She could lie to Kuno, tell him Akane had just gone away for a while. Kuno would believe her. Heck, Kuno would believe her if she said that the sun had not come up today. She could get rid of him if she wanted to. But she did not. She did not get rid of him because he deserved to know. He might be annoying. He might be one of the most irritating people in the entire world, but in his own perverted and strange way, he too had cared for Akane. That alone was enough to make Ranma forgive him of many sins. Since Akane had gone, Ranma had discovered that she would tolerate a great many things that she would not have done while Akane was alive.

>
"She's gone, Kuno. Akane is dead. The rumour is true."

>
Kuno let forth a scream of rage and suffering that could be heard throughout the district and clutched his head in pain. "Oh Akane! Oh, you sweet, sweet beauty! To be struck down in life so young! To never know the true depths of my love for you!"

>
He continued on in this vein for some time, ignoring the way that so many of the people in front of him looked like they were becoming increasingly tense and angry. Part way though his triad, he suddenly stopped and looked at Ranma with his eyes narrowed to slits. With a slow, careful movement, Kuno drew his bokken and held it before him.

>
Wind ruffled his hair, and his dark hakama eddied slightly in the breeze. "Tell me, Pig-Tailed Girl. Tell me who it is that has done this thing? Who is it that would deprive the world of one so perfect? How would dare face the wrath of Kuno by taking from him the woman that would one day be his bride? Speak, Pig-Tailed Girl, and I shall go and deliver the only justice they deserve."

>
Again, Ranma studied the older boy. If she did not tell him, he would find out by himself somehow and if he did that, he would surely be slain in combat alone, without the support of his schoolmates. Alternatively, Ranma could tell him. She could tell Kuno about the team that they had gathered for the purpose of bringing the Senshi, the Witches and the demons to justice.

>
Kuno was weaker than her, there was no question of that in Ranma's mind. However, when he went all out, he might even be able to beat Shampoo or Ucchan. No guarantees, but it would be close enough to not be a foregone conclusion. Even if he could not beat the girls, he was a talented Kendoist, and every person they had with them when they faced the Senshi would be a boon. He had seen how Mousse, Shampoo and Ukyo had been beaten earlier. If they had Kuno with them...

>
So Ranma spoke. Gently, calmly, and without much of the anger and passion she truly felt. Most days of the year, she would have gone to any length to avoid Kuno, but today she needed him. Today, tomorrow, and until the evil was cleaned from Tokyo. For that, she would be polite. She would speak to him as you would an ordinary human.

>
It did not take long for Kuno to agree to join them. Indeed, it took more effort to convince him to go home for the night. Whereas they had just been beaten by the Senshi, he was filled with invective and a desire for battle. Finally he did leave, vowing to return to them tomorrow and fight together, to punish the people that would do such things to those he loved.

>
* * *

>
As the new day broke, the denizens of the Tendo household came awake and began to stir. At least, two of them did. Tendo Kasumi and Soun awoke as the day began and commenced their work. Kasumi's work was long standing, the preparation of meals and the house for her family. It was something that brought her great pleasure, but associated with some small pain. It was difficult to prepare a meal without thinking of that extra serving that someone would not be eating. In time, the pain would ease, but for now, she lived with it, trying to remember how much Akane would have loved to see her friends all working together as well as they had yesterday.

>
Soun's daily routine had begun only recently. Until his baby girl had been attacked, he had been content to sleep in, to enjoy the smells of breakfast that his eldest daughter prepared. Now, sleep was an enemy, filled with regrets and dreams of a wife and a child he would never see again.

>
Work was the only cure for those dreams, the only way he knew to fight off the thoughts of what would happen to the rest of his family now that demons roamed the city that even Ranma and his friends could not defeat. Tilling the soil in the garden once more, Soun carefully avoided looking at the remains of the dojo in his yard. He could have cleaned it up - it was his house and dojo - but he did not. That dojo and the remains in the yard were an inspiration to Ranma and his friends. He would not take that away from them.

>
Although it had only been there for a short time, weeds were already beginning to grow up between the boards that lay on the ground. No weeds were permitted elsewhere in the garden, and the relentless hunt for them was one thing Soun could count on to help to while away the day.

>
"That's some funny training you're doing there, Tendo-kun. Something like 'The Crouch Of The Fierce Tiger', I assume?"

>
"Saotome-kun..."

>
The big man stood behind him and beckoned him to get up. "Time

to get you back in shape. Come on, it's time for a jog. Get some of those soft muscles back into condition."

>
Although he resisted the idea, Soun found himself obeying his old training partner. Before he knew what had happened, they had both been for a twenty minute run through the suburbs, and we back at the house, gasping and wheezing but in time for some of Kasumi's breakfast. Rather than spoil the meal for everyone else, they sat their sweaty, rank bodies at the back on the house and dug into a special "training breakfast" of rice and omelette.

>
"Saotome-kun... I can honestly say I cannot ever remember feeling worse than I do."

>
Giving a big belly laugh, Genma slapped him on the back. "That's the idea Tendo-kun. Always strive for something better than before."

>
"Ohhh... I don't think I'm built for martial arts anymore."

>
"Nonsense. You're just a little out of condition. Come, a bit of sparring, a few Kata, we'll have you feeling on top of the world again in no time."

>
So it was when the weary teenagers rose from their rest, they were greeted with the sight of two old men in the back yard. Although Kasumi had heard their plans, even she was struck by the vision of her father again taking up the art he had once abandoned. After a short breakfast, Ranma punched Ryoga in the shoulder and gestured to the back yard.

>
"What's it gunna be? We going to let them have all the fun?"

>
"You're not much, Ranma, but I'll get a better workout fighting you than I will training Ukyo-san." With that, Ryoga grabbed his eating partner and threw him through the open door and into the Koi pond.

>
"Ryoga you idiot!"

>
"Hey! This way you can go all out with those weak girlie punches of yours. Just think about me, I've got to keep holding back so I don't break you!"

>
With a growl, Ranma raced from the still turbulent pond, grabbed Ryoga and threw him across the yard and into the compound wall.

"Let's just see who needs to hold back!"

>
"With pleasure!"

>
By the time Hotaru came down - still wearing one of Kasumi's oversize T-shirts - Shampoo and Ukyo were also out in the yard, turning the Tendo compound into a series of small running battles. Blinking several times in the bright morning sunlight, Hotaru looked around for something closer to what she considered a normal morning.

>
When she spotted Kasumi humming in the kitchen, Hotaru's face lit up with a genuine smile. Walking up to the girl, Hotaru linked her hands in front and gave a sunny, "Good morning, Kasumi-nee-chan!"

>
"Good morning to you, Hotaru-chan. How are you today?"

>
"Very well, thank you, Neechan. I know it's late, but do you have any breakfast left?"

>
"Of course I do, Little Firefly. You go and sit down at the table, and I'll bring something out in a moment."

>
Nodding once, Hotaru left. Seated at the table, she thought how much better she felt at the moment than she usually did. Smiling as she watched people jump around the yard in ways she would not have believed possible just a week ago, she knew why she felt so good. All

around her, she had friends. Real friends. People that liked her, talked to her and made her feel good just to be with them. That was even better than the other reason she felt so good.

>
Last night, she had been a heroine. A genuine, honest-to-goodness, one hundred percent magical girl. She had gone out into Tokyo and done her best to make it a safer, better place for everyone. That was why she was here, that was why she had these powers, and she had finally done it. After all the days that had passed since she had first gained her powers, she had finally done the right thing, and it felt good! She had gone out with her friends, and she had made a difference, for once, people had really wanted her there, had honestly needed her.

>
It felt good.

>
A slight rattle announced a steaming bowl of miso and the arrival of some rice, eggs and vegetables. Although not a big eater, the sight and smell of such lovely food made Hotaru's mouth water like a fire hydrant. "Mmm. That smells so good, Kasumi-nee-chan."

>
"You're welcome." Taking a sip from some tea she had brought for herself, Kasumi smiled beatifically at Hotaru and kept her company at breakfast. "You must have had an exciting night yesterday, Hotaru-chan. It's already past nine."

>
A little sheepishly, Hotaru slurped down some of the leaves in her miso and put the bowl down. "I was up late with Ranma-san and Ryoga-san. We all stayed up late talking."

>
"Well, so long as you didn't tire yourself out with all that running around. You still look a little pale. We wouldn't want you to get sick again, would we?"

>
Hotaru shook her head and gobbled up a little more of the rice. Although to her it felt as though she was bolting her food and being very rude in front of her new big sister, Kasumi saw it differently. To Kasumi eyes, used to hungry martial artists, Hotaru calmly and delicately ate her food, with better manners than she could remember seeing in this house for years.

>
When the little girl gave a small, polite burp and hid her mouth with her hand as her face turned rosy, Kasumi smiled. "It looks like you needed that. Are you going to be training with them today? If you are, please be careful. You have to remember that you're not as big and strong as Ranma-kun."

>
"Nnn. Ranma-san is really good... But I'm not going to be doing that sort of thing for a while. He says he wants me to get all better before he starts to teach me martial arts."

>
"Ranma is going to teach you martial arts?"

>
"Yes. He said that everyone should know how to defend themselves."

>
"You should be very proud. Ranma-kun is very good. I'm sure he'll make a fine teacher."

>
"Ranma-san is the best."

>
Kasumi giggled. "Don't let him hear that. He'll believe you."

>
Looking up at her new big sister, Hotaru's eyes shimmered. "But he is! I know he must be the best. He can even turn into a girl so we can fight evil together!"

>
Outside the door, the martial artist in question was completing a complex summersault over Ryoga as he fended off both Genma and Soun. "Well, I certainly don't know anyone who is better than he is. Except possibly Cologne-san. Granny is very good."

>
"I'm glad you think so." An old voice came from Kasumi's left elbow.

>
When both girls had gotten over their shock of seeing the

ancient matriarch seated at the table with them, Hotaru continued the conversation with the sublime confidence of a true believer.

"Ranma-san is better."

>
Giving Hotaru an amused look, Cologne heaped up a bowl with some of the left over rice and helped herself. "Not yet, Child. Not yet. Son-In-Law has some distance to go yet."

>
Shaking her head with complete faith, Hotaru responded. "You just don't know him well enough. Nobody can beat Ranma-san. Maybe not even me."

>
That caused Cologne to laugh loudly. The girl has less fighting power than Kasumi, but yet she thought she was more powerful than herself or her Son-In-Law. That was very amusing.

>
"Hey, Old Ghoul. Nice to see you finally got here."

>
When Cologne finished laughing she saw that Ranma had been joined by Ryoga, Mousse, Ukyo and Shampoo. A veritable army of martial artists, Cologne could only pity anyone that decided to take them all on. While they might not all be as powerful as Son-In-Law, they were each a force to be reckoned with. Even that fool Mousse.

>
After moving out to the yard, everyone was tense and slightly nervous. Aside from Hotaru. She was standing next to Ranma, so she knew she was safe from anything and anyone. For everyone else, it was a chance to try and find out what had gone wrong yesterday. They had more people on their side, but they had still been beaten by the Senshi. What could possibly have happened?

>
Shampoo had volunteered the services of her Great-Grandmother in trying to analyse the battle and work up some new strategies for them. Nabiki was sitting to one side listening, but she did not expect to be able to contribute much to this. Her analytical mind might be second to none, but she would not think of trying to match wits with Cologne when it came to planning and fighting battles. Working with her was definitely on the cards though.

>
For the martial artists gathered, it was a time they had been looking forwards to with dread. Now their skills would come into question, their capabilities scrutinised, and their actions taken apart in detail. It was no-one's pleasure to pick on their fellows or to be shown up, but they needed to do this. Unless they knew why they had lost last time, they would be doomed to repeat it.

>
Asking the fighters to join her outside, Cologne was surprised when the little girl she had been talking to joined them. Assuming that she was just watching like Nabiki, Cologne did not address her, but concentrated on Ranma and his allies.

>
"Son-In-Law, perhaps you can start by telling me what your main problem was."

>
Ranma smacked his fist into his palm. "The big thing I don't get is why we did so bad this time. First time Ryoga and I fought them, well, we didn't do much better, but at least I nailed one of them pretty good. This time we had Ucchan, Shampoo and Mousse, but they still beat us just as easy."

>
Cologne nodded wisely. "Surprise. A man with a bow and arrow can defeat a man with a tank if he has surprise. The same is true here."

>
"But Granny," Ukyo began. "Could it really be that much? I mean, we still managed to get the drop on them this time."

>
"Yes, but this time they knew what you could do. Last time, they would not have expected Son-In-Law to be that good. Few people are up to your standard. From what Shampoo has told me about your enemies, they would not be used to attacking trained fighters, people who could resist. Last time, they probably just expected you to roll over and die. This time, they knew they had to take you seriously."

>
Nabiki nodded beside her. "She's right. I've spent some time doing searches on some of their victims. None of them seem to be martial artists. There's the occasional sportsman, but no-one that you guys would call either fast or strong."

>
For a time it looked like Ukyo would protest some more, but support from both Shampoo and Ranma for what Cologne had told them caused her to back down. If this was what had happened to them when they surprised the Senshi, what would happen if the Senshi ever surprised them?

>
When they got on to the analysis of what their enemies were capable of, Cologne was surprised when everyone looked at the little girl sitting quietly beside Ranma. Quickly a blush spread over her cheeks and she looked at the ground, obviously embarrassed. Cologne found that quite amusing considering the egos of everyone else around.

>
"And why would everyone be so interested in you, Child?"

>
"..."

>
"I beg your pardon?"

>
"I'm a magical girl, too. I'm the most powerful magical girl in the whole wide world."

>
"Really? Well, perhaps you could show me some of your attacks then. It would be nice to see just what our enemies are capable of."

>
"I can't." The girl went even more red.

>
"Why? We're all friends here. I'm sure Ryoga would be kind enough to act as a volunteer if we needed one." Ryoga looked nervous, but not half as nervous as Hotaru.

>
"No! I can't! It... It would kill poor Ryoga-san. That's... That's why I can't use my attacks. They just do too much. If... If I fired it that way..." Hotaru gestured off towards the front gate. "It would destroy everything all the way down the street. That's why I could never stop any of those girls that attacked me."

>
When everyone sat silently digesting that, Hotaru looked more nervous. When her eyes began to shimmer and her lower lip tremble slightly, Ranma put a hand on her head and exclaimed happily. "I've got it! You can do that shield thing! That was pretty good yesterday. If the Senshi couldn't get through it when they tried, maybe we should. It might show the Old Ghoul some easy way to defeat their magic."

>
Hotaru brightened immediately and started immediately. When she transformed, Cologne's eyes narrowed to small slits. 'So,' she thought. 'This is a magical girl. I can feel her power, but it is nothing like what I expected.'

>
"Very well, Child. Please, show me this shield."

>
Walking away from the group, Hotaru planted the end of the Silence Glaive and concentrated. "SILENCE WALL!"

>
Everyone waited.

>
"Are we supposed to see something, Sugar?"

>
"No... I don't think so. I can see where it is, but I don't think anyone else can. Just come to the front of my Glaive. You should be able to feel it then."

>
Slowly the group approached until they were within arms reach of the invisible barrier. With looks of wonder on their face, people ran their hands over the Silence Wall, marvelling at the smooth strength they were not able to see. Other than Ryoga, that is. He had accidentally walked into it, and his sore nose was testament enough to the Silence Wall's solidity.

>
"Will you be safe if we try to break it?" Cologne asked. When

the small, fuku clad girl nodded, Cologne gestured them forwards and everyone laid into the barrier with their weapons, feet or fists. After a minute of this, Cologne ordered them to stop and again addressed the girl.

>
"How did that feel? How did it compare with what you felt yesterday?"

>
"Actually... It wasn't too bad. I think I could stop that sort of thing for quite a while..." As Hotaru trailed off, they understood her worry. If two or three Senshi were more of a threat to her than their whole group, they had real problems.

>
"Son-In-Law, Ryoga. If you please, now would be a good time to demonstrate this new move I have been told about."

>
Again when Hotaru nodded, everyone moved back and Ranma and Ryoga took position. Cupping their hands together, they focused on what was needed for the depression blast. Akane, the Senshi, their own inadequacy in battle. All this and more poured into the green balls growing in their hands. Without any signal, the two boys launched simultaneously. "SHI SHI HOKODAN!"

>
Green energy impacted the screen and splashed harmlessly.

Harmlessly to Hotaru, but the rest felt the backlash, and the ground was scored heavily. "Better... But those two big girls were much stronger..." Now Hotaru looked very apologetic.

>
"How about the Bakusai Tenketsu, Old Ghoul. You wanna try that?"

>
"No, Son-In-Law. I can see it from here. Or rather, I cannot see it. There are no breaking points in that wall. It is not an object like we know. It is not flawed in the same way a rock or boulder is. The breaking point will not work." Heaving a sigh, Cologne waved her hand at Hotaru. "Relax yourself, Child. We shall not continue this."

>
When Hotaru joined back with the group, transformed back into her normal self and looking none the worse for wear, Cologne sighed. "I would be interested in trying you in combat, to see if that is the same as those other girls. Unfortunately, I can see you are not well. Perhaps in the future, but for now, I see little we can gain from it."

>
With everyone watching her for the wisdom that she was so renowned for, Cologne paused for thought. "Until we know more, I do not know any secret techniques that would be quite suitable to you. For now, I would recommend we concentrating on improving each of your specialties. You must be faster, better, stronger... Being the best martial artist is no longer enough. You must find it within yourself to become more, for without that, surely you shall fail."

>
"I ain't gunna fail, Old Ghoul. And I ain't stopping until we've won this war."

>
Ranma's grin was confident, but inside he felt worry. They seemed to be a long way behind the enemy if even little Hotaru could defeat them that easily. But then, they were not fighting Hotaru, and they had already seen that their enemy could be hurt.

>
* * *

>
Tomoe Souichi sat in his basement laboratory and brooded. If only he had known a week ago that his daughter was Sailor Saturn, all this inconvenience could have been avoided. A compulsion spell, brainwashing, magical seals on her power, even simply locking her in her room... Almost anything could have been done to stop her escaping, if he had but known in time.

>
Now... Now it was too late. The bird had flown the coop in an all too literal manner. One lapse in the tight supervision that he kept Hotaru under, and she had been able to manifest the powers of a Senshi. In just a few short steps, she had freed herself from his

grasp, and now he was at a loss as to how to retrieve her.

>
Souichi had to salute Mistress 9 for her choice of hosts, if she indeed knew that Hotaru was going to be Sailor Saturn. Eliminating an enemy while at the same time gaining them the powers inherent to the pretty soldier was a brilliant plan. On the other hand, if she knew but had not told him, it was one of the greatest bungles in their entire history.

>
Rather than try to place blame and look backwards at what had happened, Tomoe decided to accept that the whole situation was a coincidence. Unlikely, but it meant that he did not have to be in the unenviable position of having a mistress that had jeopardised their whole mission, nor did he have to admit to any fault of his own. Anticipating that the host for their possession was a Senshi was obviously more than anyone would have expected of him.

>
First and foremost he needed his daughter back. The possession would not proceed to schedule unless he had frequent contact. Worse, Mistress 9 was at constant risk if Hotaru was associating with the other Sailor Senshi. It would not take long before one of the other young girl warriors spotted the blemishes in Hotaru's spirit. Souichi shuddered thinking what would happen to the unfortunate Mistress 9 if Sailor Moon was able to direct her Moon Healing Activation against her. When Mistress 9 was in full control, there would be no risk, but for now, she was vulnerable.

>
Simply finding his daughter was enough of a challenge. Tokyo was a massive city, one of the largest in the world, and it was not as though he could simply search the local phonebook under 'S' for "Senshi, Saturn". The girls tended to be just a little more discrete with their identities than that.

>
He had braced his underlings to look out for the girl, but even then, he was not sure what they could achieve. If Sailor Saturn had her powers - and it appeared as though she did - it would not be easy to capture her. Be that as it may, they would try... At least he could look forwards to punishing them when they failed... That thought brought a smile to his face; one totally unlike anything his daughter might have seen in the past.

>
Using purely mundane means was out too. The police would be the simplest route, but what could he say to them? He could picture how the conversation would go: "Hello, my daughter ran away from home, I need your help finding her."

>
"Oh, yes, Sir? And why would she do that?"

>
He would laugh. "She thought I was possessed by evil and trying to kill her."

>
"And why would she think that?"

>
Time to sweat. "Umm... No idea! Honestly! And if she offers to turn into Sailor Saturn and prove it, don't believe her!"

>
He snorted. No, he could not go to the police. They might find his daughter, but one short explanation to the social workers later, and she would be free or under ridiculously close examination every day by a society that just would not accept that he knew what was best for them.

>
Resting his head in the palms of his hand, Souichi looked solemnly at a notebook that lay open on his workbench. Just assuming he did find her... How was he supposed to get her back and keep her? The Witches 5 were good; there was no doubt about it. With their cunning, they could almost certainly trap her, but could they really expect to trap her and carry her off when the rest of the Senshi were protecting her? Even if they did succeed in abducting her could they overcome her Senshi powers and control her while she was actively resisting?

>
For the thousandth time, Souichi wished that he had known about this small complication before his daughter flew away.

>
No, the only thing he could really hope for was his current plan. A trap. Nice, simple, and elegant. With the house rebuilt to look like it always had, and most of their research and work moved somewhere else, it should be hard for Sailor Saturn to recognise the evil that had once dwelt here. She would come in, naive, innocent and stupid, and he would pounce. When she saw the house as she was used to it, and when he said that she had just had another one of her fainting spells and imagined everything...

>
Souichi smiled. With her vulnerable and trusting, they would strike. She would be in their power and under their control faster than she could resist. Best of all, by making things look peaceful and normal, none of her Senshi friends would get involved. Truly, it was the best plan.

>
If only the girl would hurry up and fall into the trap!

>
* * *

>
Afternoon was again beginning to fall. Throughout the Tendo compound, martial artists were finishing their fights and preparing for a few hours of rest. A day of hard training could only go so far, and they would need all the energy they could muster when they fought the good fight again that evening.

>
Relaxing in the living room was a group of people who nobody every expected to truly be able to relax together. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say 'gathered in the living room was a group of people pretending to relax together'.

>
Nabiki - in a role more demanding than any of the conflicts she had ever started - was playing the peace keeper. In the last fifteen minutes, she had managed to stop not less than two fights between Shampoo and Ukyo, another three between Ranma and Ryoga or Ranma and Kuno, not to mention at least three attempts of Mousse to attack either a pot plant or her sister while claiming that they were Ranma.

>
It seemed that the only people in the room not brewing for a fight with someone was herself, Kasumi and Hotaru. Somehow it was distressing that she could not make some sexist remark about how it was the hormone drenched boys causing all the trouble, since Shampoo and Ukyo was causing just as much trouble as any of the others.

>
No matter how much the two remaining fiancées tried to hide it, Nabiki saw as plain as day that they still wanted Ranma, and in some way they were willing to profit by Akane's demise. She wanted to hate them for that, but she could not. They were here, and they were fighting to avenge her sister, and that was what really mattered. Perhaps if Ranma reciprocated their attentions she might have been upset - actually, upset would hardly have been a hundredth as strong a word as would be needed. As it was, he was even more obtuse and thick headed than usual. To him, there was only the fight; all else could wait.

>
Kasumi was bringing out a tray of snacks when Hotaru asked a question so obvious, it made people wonder why no-one had asked it before. "Kasumi-neechan, does your mother help you with all the cooking you do? It's very good, but I never get to see her and say thank you."

>
Kasumi's face fell slightly. "Thank you, Little One, but I do all of the cooking these days. Our mother... Is no longer with us anymore."

>
An assortment of nods came from around the table, understanding on all of the people's faces. "Daddy always told me that my mother was in a beautiful place beyond the sky. Where everything is always

pretty and she would always be happy. I'm sure your mother is there with her too, Kasumi-nee-chan."

>
As Kasumi and Nabiki nodded, Ukyo gave a brave smile and made her own contribution. "My mum died just before I met Ranma. I guess that's why I got on so well with him, Ranma being on his own with his idiot father and all. When Ranchan and his father... Ummm... Well, I left my father not too much after that, so I guess he never really told me what happened. I was only a little kid at the time."

>
"I was like that. I actually inherited my good direction sense from my father. He usually only takes a few days to get to the chemist down the street. According to the doctors at the hospital, my mother got up one night to go to the bathroom a couple of days after I was born, and I haven't seen her since. I see Dad occasionally, and my mother leaves letters at the house every now and again... I might have seen her once a couple of years ago, but I'm not sure."

>
Going around the circle, everyone's eyes stopped on Kuno. With a look of sternness, possibly disdain, the scion of House Kuno looked away. "My story is not fit to tell in the presence of young and innocent ears. A child such as this one should not be a party to the horror of what happened to my mother before she..." He cleared his throat. "In this I shall defer to Saotome for his story. My sister did not take well to the news when she was told, and I would be most disinclined to see that happen to a soldier of the way of light at such a young age."

>
For a moment, the great Kuno Tatewaki, Blue Thunder Of Furinkan High, looked into the distance, seeing scenes that only he could. A time when the Kuno family was complete, whole and undamaged. And another time, a time less savoury, a time when the world came apart for all of them. They were all touched in their own way that day; mother, daughter, father and son. Three survived, but Kuno had wondered whether his mother may have been the lucky one on that day of horror. She alone had not needed to deal with the effects left in the wake of the events.

>
Blinking gormlessly, Ranma scratched his head. "Umm... I dunno... I guess I never really asked. I can remember her a bit from when I was young, but I've been on the road with Pop since I was six, so I don't really know. I guess I assumed she... I dunno..."

>
Looking around, Ranma spotted his father sparring lightly with the Tendo patriarch. "Hey! Old Man!"

>
When then burly martial artist entered the room, everyone looked up at him. "Pops, what happened to Mum?"

>
"What do you mean what happened to her?"

>
"I mean did she die or kick your lazy butt out or something? What happened?"

>
Genma scratched the scarf covering his head. "Nothing, Boy. What did you think happened?"

>
"What!? What do you mean 'nothin'!? What the heck have we been wandering around all this time for if Mum's still alive?!"

>
"Are you insane, Boy? Do you realise what she would do if she---" Genma cut off in mid-sentence. Slowly he backed away. "No, Boy, your training is not over yet. No, until you are ready to be the master of the School, we cannot return to your mother. Practice, Boy. That is what is needed, right Tendo-kun?"

>
Scratching his moustache, Soun looked wistfully into the distance. As Genma took him by the elbow and led him away, they could still hear him talk for a while. "Ahh, Nodoka. Such a lovely woman."

Good cook too. Say, Saotome-kun, I seem to remember you telling me about a fetish she had... What was it? Bondage? No... Ah! That's right! She was always obsessed with cutting things. You were always saying it was a shaving cut or something silly like that!... Say, didn't she used to like carrying a katana around? Lovely woman besides that of course, just lovely, and as sweet as anything..."

>
Sweating nervously, everyone faced back to the centre of the table and was silent. They knew Ranma was strange, but they assumed he had gotten that from his father. Maybe that was not the only source of his problems. In an effort to steer the conversation away from Ranma's parents, people looked at Shampoo who was on his right.

>
She in turn regaled them with stories of her mother. Naturally, the fierce Amazon warrior had been both incredibly skilled and beautiful, like all her line. Regrettably, when outnumbered vastly by the inferior fighters of the Musk, she had been brought low. Now however, she was in a place much like the one Hotaru had described, except this was the Amazon version of heaven. Continuous battle broken only by feasting, celebration and other fighting. In many ways it was reminiscent of the stories of the Norse gods, and their visions of Asgard... but slightly more violent and female dominated.

>
Shampoo's stories of glory and battle led them to talking about their own exploits and the great battles they had fought in the past. In no time, each of the martial artists was strutting around the room, boasting to the skies about how powerful they were and how no foe could defeat them. Looking out the sliding door to where her father and his guest still practiced gentle Kata, Nabiki took in the gathering darkness of evening and smiled.

>
"If everyone is feeling so confident, perhaps now would be a good time to head off?"

>
There was a slight hesitation, but only slight. In no time, a chorus of cheers and determination rang out, and the group announced their commitment. Standing as one, the valiant martial artists rose and left the room. After a moment, Ranma returned and looked down at one of the girls left sitting behind in the room. "So, you coming, Hotaru?"

>
With amazement in her eyes, the girl looked up and blinked at her idol, once again female as she prepared for a night of work.

"You... You want me to come with you?"

>
"I said you could come when you were ready." Ranma gave a cocky grin. "I figure what you showed us yesterday says you're ready. What do you think?"

>
When the transformed Hotaru walked out to join the other fighters gathered in the front yard, she could not remember the last time she had been so proud. All her life, she had been 'Hotaru, the weak, sickly little strange girl'. Now she wasn't. Standing among all of these strong fighters, she was a valued member of their team. Finally, after all those years, she was a member of that most important group in the world... She was a part of a group of friends, she was one of 'us', not a stranger on the outside looking in.

>
Feeling ten feet tall and strong enough to take on the entire team of Sailor Senshi at once, she walked proudly in the middle of the group. Her massive polearm and shock white costume made her stand out against the softer colours the others wore, but she would not have traded it in an instant. Her magic made her worthwhile.

>
Walking along, Hotaru did not notice the way the others placed

themselves around her in a way that they could protect her. For all that she had proven her ability to form an impregnable shield, she was the weakest of them all. For all intents and purposes, she was also incapable of attacking their enemies; no matter what powers she might claim. The fact that she weighed less than Ryoga's umbrella had nothing to do with their protective instinct, but something in the girl inspired their protective instincts.

>
An hour into the patrol, Hotaru was riding on top of Ryoga's backpack. She was not yet too tired to walk, but her weight was negligible to him, and that let the group run and jump, covering vastly more ground in a night than they could hope to while walking. Resting most of the time also let Hotaru add a new dimension to their scouting that they had never had before: flight. For short periods, Hotaru would soar aloft on her gossamer wings, looking for the trouble that they sought, taking advantage of her magical powers for more than just fleeing.

>
Naturally, it was one of the times that she was resting comfortably - or as comfortably as one can while sitting sideways on the top of a hard backpack that was currently moving down the street at high speed - that they found their enemy for the night.

>
Emerald, one of the evil sorceresses in the employ of a group calling themselves the Dark Moon Family. They had not fought her head on before, but this time it looked like they would. The woman was laughing villainously behind her fan watching a building full of people not far from them. With a yell and a wave, Ranma urged the team forwards. If she was alone, this could be their big chance. They would be able to take her down and make Tokyo safer by one villain.

>
Not waiting for the others, Ranma sprinted forwards, planning on getting the surprise on her and making her regret her inattention. Behind her Hotaru nimbly landed as she jumped off Ryoga's pack, and the rest of the martial artists drew weapons and ran forwards.

>
Feeling her blood surge, Ranma leapt, covering the last ten metres to Emerald with her left leg extended for a devastating kick. Less than half a metre from her target, Ranma was suddenly propelled sideways, knocked aside by a bolt of black lightning. Smoking slightly, Ranma rolled to her feet and shook her head. Emerald, now facing them laughed again as their faces dropped when they realised the truth. The truth that they had not caught her unawares, but had again underestimated their foes.

>
"Prince Diamond told me to be careful of others out here tonight, not just the Senshi. I thought he meant the Death Busters, someone dangerous, not just a group of children like you! Droid! Destroy them! Drain their energy and use it to power of Crystal!"

>
The Droid, the source of the dark energy that had hit Ranma walked from the building. Even Ranma and Ryoga - fortified by anger and hatred - backed up a step in awe of the figure they saw. Still somehow female in appearance, the Droid was a parody on the toys from the store that it came from. Large, plastic looking fins protruded from her upper arms, and she was covered in interlocking plates of metal or plastic armour. Most of her face was covered by a mask reminiscent of a dozen anime of giant mecha. The fact that Droid was a healthy two and half metres tall and heavy enough to crack the pavement when it walked made lie to the thought that it was just a feeble toy.

>
"I deal with this thing. You guys take care of the old woman!" With that Ranma again charged, but this time she was sure in her

target, seeking to occupy the Droid while they accomplished their real mission.

>
"'Old Woman'?" Emerald screamed. "I'll have you know I am the most beautiful person in all of Prince Diamond's court."

>
"Shampoo think court must no have other woman."

>
Snarling, Emerald snapped her fan closed and pointed at them. "Destroy them! Destroy them all! Do not stop until they are dead!" Looking away she muttered. "Not even the Senshi are this insulting..."

>
Slow to respond initially, the Droid failed to stop Ranma as the small red-head launched in and delivered a series of side kicks to its head before dropping top the ground in front of it and sweeping out both legs. There was a massive crunch as concrete shattered when the plastic monstrosity landed. Standing up, Ranma flicked her pig-tail back over her shoulder with a negligent thumb. "Feh! That weren't so tough."

>
"Ran-chan!"

>
"Airen!"

>
"Ranma-san!"

>
"You idiot!"

>
"Saotome!"

>
A chorus of voices rang out, but it was too late. Not even phased by the kicks and the rough landing, the toy / mecha / girl / Droid / thing lashed out with its own kick. It had none of Ranma's finesse, but it had ten times the power, more than enough to catch Ranma in the middle of the back and send her slamming into the front wall of the store. As everyone rushed it, the Droid followed up its victory and grabbed the briefly stunned Ranma out of the concrete she had been embedded in.

>
Holding the front of the red shirt, the Droid accepted a bonbori strike to its side for the pleasure of drawing back its massive fist and sending it rocketing into the unprotected jaw in front of it. Tearing a great section of shirt off the front of the red-head, the Droid's blow sent her flying high into they sky, flailing limply like a rag doll.

>
Ranma's landing would have been rather nasty, but a small form that had been reluctant to enter the fight suddenly took to the air and caught her. Hotaru might not have been strong enough to carry someone larger like Mousse or Ryoga, but Ranma's female form was not much larger than she was, the martial artist's rock hard strength hidden within an apparently fragile shell. Sweating under the strain, Hotaru could not fly off with her friend, but she could ensure a safe, soft landing. When they touched down, she briefly took in the fight and concentrated. She had to be able to do something to help as she held the unconscious form of Ranma in her arms.

>
Infuriated by the sight of their fiancée being treated that way, Shampoo and Ukyo moved in to demolish the plastic horror. A brace of throwing spatulas simply bounce off harmlessly, but the combined attacks of the girls managed to send plastic chips flying as the Droid was forced to block and protect its face. The momentum did not last long, for as the boys manoeuvred into position to join the fight, Shampoo was sent sailing backwards with a blow strong enough to make her ribs creak.

>
Caught by the flying Shampoo, Mousse was sent sprawling one way, while his glasses flew in the other direction with an ominous tinkling sound. By the time he had clambered to his feet, the world had devolved into an almost uniform blur. Only the massive quantities of bright, primary colours identified their adversary, but until he could don a new pair of glasses, he would be the same liability that

Ranma had initially feared.

>
At least, he might be a liability to most of the team. He could not tell where most of their crew were, but Ryoga was easy to spot. At least, Mousse assumed that it was Ryoga. He hoped it was Ryoga. Anyone else capable of glowing a swirling, sickly green that cut through even his impaired vision was someone he hoped would only exist once in this world.

>
Ryoga's depression was obvious. Kuno had been felled by Emerald as soon as he had tried to attack her with his bokken. Ranma was down. Hotaru was hiding. Shampoo and Mousse were lying on the ground. And Ukyo... Ukyo was hanging by her throat as the Droid slowly crushed the air out of her.

>
Channelling Ki into his hands, Ryoga let his Shi Shi Hokodan build. He could not hit Emerald because she was behind the Droid, and he could not hit the Droid without frying Ukyo. Uselessness, failure, despair; these things only fuelled his attack even more. Burning with anger, Ryoga swore that this would not be another battle that they lost.

>
"Droid! Kill her! Do not hesitate! We will take their energy and rise, more powerful than ever!"

>
Slowly, the Droid closed its chunky fingers around Ukyo's pale, slender throat until...

>

>
End Of Chapter

>
Well... Can you say "cliff-hanger"? Well done! I know you could.

>
What is going to happen to Ukyo? Will Shampoo finally be in the clear as the last surviving fiancée of Ranma? Will Ukyo suddenly realise that she is the improbably named Sailor Oort Cloud, cross dressing half-sister of Sailor Pluto? Will she suddenly gain amazing powers and save all of Tokyo in one fell swoop? Will someone put some sense into this rant?

>
All this and more, next, on Vengeance And A Half 06!

>

>End Of Author's Rant <p><p>

7. Frozen Consciences

> _____
 / \
> | Vengeance And A Half |
 \ _____/

>
Thanks to my pre-readers:

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aevan <http://aevan.virtualave.net>

>Kevin D. Hammel <http://www.anime.sobhrach.com/~khammel/>

>Blood Blade <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Towers/5920>

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>
What has happened:

>The time travel of Prince Diamond and the Inner Senshi at the end of

Sailor Moon R has caused a paradox. Now the Outer Senshi are awake, the

>Death Busters are active, and the Dark Moon Family are still trying to

conquer the world. In a desperate bid to stop a Daimon from gaining her

>Heart Crystal, the Outer Senshi were responsible for Akane's death. Now

Nabiki, Cologne and Genma are providing support for the

growing team

>seeking to defeat the demons and the Senshi.

>Refusing to recognise Sailor Moon as the real Moon Princess due to her
actions against them, the Outers have decided that the only course of

>action is to defeat all their enemies in Tokyo and create a new Moon
Kingdom. Unfortunately, this also means removing the "traitorous" Inner

>Senshi, something the coldly calculating Sailor Uranus has no qualms
about.

>
While the Inner Senshi seem plagued on either side, things are moving

>from bad to worse. Not only do they have to contend with two sets of
villains and the deadly Outer Senshi, but now abnormally strong humans

>seem to be out to get them as well.

>For Ranma and his friends, their attempts at exacting revenge for Akane
seemed doomed to failure. In every battle they have come off second

>best, and now Emerald, with the help of her improved Droids, is
preparing to reduce the number of living fiancées further.

>
For now, it would seem the only thing holding back the quick and

>overwhelming victory of evil is the presence of other evil. War rages,
and all of Tokyo is the battleground.

>

>Part 6: Frozen Consciences
=====

>
"I don't like it, Luna."

>
"I don't like it either, Usagi-sama. Something is very wrong."

>
Tsukino Usagi brooded and nibbled on another of Rei's red bean buns.

>The way she nibbled slowly at it was testament to her level of worry.
The fact that Rei did not even chide her for her eating, let alone the

>theft of the food spoke volumes about that girl's concern. Unlike Usagi,
Rei's concern was on more than just the errant Outer Senshi and their

>victims. The main focus for her concern was sitting opposite her eating
a bun.

>
It was hard to stay objective about the safety of a person when you

>have given your life for them once before. Lots of people - soldiers,
parents, bodyguards - are willing to give their life for someone else.

>Rei could not readily think of anyone other than the Sailor Senshi that
had actually given their life, and then been brought back to serve

>again. Although she could not remember anything between her death and
coming back, it was a defining experience.

>
With eyes narrowed in thought, Rei tried to think of a way out of their

>current problem. Thinking up complex schemes and discerning complex
patterns might traditionally be Ami's forte, but they were all doing

>their best. Usagi did it because her heart was so big that she could
not live with the idea of people like the Outers acting the way they

>did. Simply because Luna and Artemis had told her that they were

once
her mother's soldiers in the time of the Moon Kingdom, she had assumed

>responsibility for them and their actions. The Outers callous disregard
for life hurt her more than any demon could.

>
While the other Inner Senshi were determined to stop the Outers from

>hurting anyone, and were willing to risk their lives to save the people
threatened by the bigger girls, none of them were as determined or as

>committed as Usagi was. To Usagi, everybody and anybody was worth
saving, from the small and deadly Sailor Saturn to the enigmatic,

>unseen Pluto. And if she had anything to do about it, they would be.

>None of the Inners were able to convince her that she was more
important than any other man in the street, but it was that reluctance

>to set herself above anyone else that made the Moon Senshi so endearing.
It was also the mark of a true queen, someone that does not rule out of

>a craving for power or control, but to serve the people and make their
lives better. She was a queen that would lead them into battle, rather

>than simply ordering them to fight. While she hoped that someone would
do something about the Outers, Usagi was not content to sit and wait.

>She would be doing everything in her power to make Tokyo safe, and if
someone else came along to help, they would be welcome, but she would

>always uphold her own responsibilities.

>After several minutes of near silence Minako finally spoke up. "Come on,
we have to do _something_!"

>
"But what can we do, Princess Venus?" Her loyal advisor Artemis queried.

>The use of the name 'Princess Venus' earned him a quick glare from all
of the assembled girls. One of the first things they had put an end to

>was the fancy titles. Each of them was a Senshi, with none of them
being willing to take on the mantle of Princess for a planet they ruled

>in nothing more than name. The cats still insisted in calling Sailor
Moon 'Your Highness' or 'Usagi-sama', but they were working on that too.

>
"Well, why not try what I used to do back in England? Rather than just

>waiting for something to go wrong, we start looking for trouble."

>Usagi's brow furrowed as she thought about Venus going out and picking
a fight with a bunch of tough guys in some dark alley, but she quickly

>dispelled that idea. Venus was too nice for that. Obviously she meant
something slightly different.

>
Ami nodded. "Mina-chan could be right. If we all spread out, with a

>couple of streets between us, we should be able to catch anyone working
for the Dark Moon Family or these Death Busters."

>
"Right!" Rei added. "And if we call everyone on our communicators the

>first time we spot a Daimon, we can still all get together quickly."

>Rubbing her left arm, Makoto grinned. "Sounds good to me. I still need
to get back at them from the last fight we had. Besides, I bet Mina-
>chan is still looking for that rotten little girl that broke her nose."

>Concern covered Usagi's face as she captured her tall friend's hands.
"Promise me you won't go in without the rest of us, Mako-chan! Please!
>We can't afford to fight any of these things one-on-one. Please say
you'll wait for us all."
>
Looking into the big, concerned eyes of her leader, Makoto's heart
>softened like a marshmallow left in the oven. Also like the marshmallow,
she too was sweet and nice, and was unable to resist the warmth of
>Usagi's feeling. "All right... I'll wait, but if I see someone getting
hurt, I'll have to do something."
>
"I know that, but please... Be careful? For me?"
>
A nod of the head from Makoto and the other three girls, and the plan
>was ready. Simple and elegant, it was easy enough to follow that even
Rei could not find anything to complain about. Then again, it was
>Minako's plan, and Rei only tended to pick on Usagi. For good measure -
and since she had finally noticed the nearly empty plate of sweet buns
>- Rei stuck her tongue out. While she blew a raspberry at the blonde,
she smiled inside, glad that the worry had been extinguished from
>Usagi's heart.

>Running through the brightly lit Tokyo evening streets, Sailor Venus
knew that this was what she had been born for. Blonde hair flowing in
>the slipstream behind her like a wave of golden surf, she stepped
lightly through the crowds.
>
All around the blonde agent for the goddess of love, people 'oohh'ed
>and 'aahh'ed. To her adoring public, Venus knew that she was a godsend,
a heroine, a vision of beauty, not just the person that they could turn
>to in their darkest hour and know that she would be there. Although she
was both beautiful and graceful, Sailor Venus was modest enough to
>realise that she was still an ordinary girl, and not quite as grand as
she appeared to the people watching her in awe. Recalling the delight
>she always received when a movie star or someone would recognise her,
she smiled back to the people.
>
Waving back as she ran along, Venus realised just how right Usagi had
>been that morning. This was the reason that they fought, that they had
their powers; to help the people around them. Without her adoring
>public, Venus knew that she would just be another beautiful, talented
heroine. With them, she had purpose and something to strive for. For
>the sake of a cheer and a friendly wave, Sailor Venus was willing to
give up an evening of boy chasing and hanging out at the game

centre.

>She knew that what they did mattered, and almost as importantly, other
people did too.

>
For all her soul searching and ruminations on the 'whys' and

>'wherefores' of saving Tokyo, Venus was not distracted from her true
role. She might have wanted to stay and pander to the crowds, but she

>would have plenty of time for that later when she became an Idol. For
now, she was on the lookout for just the sort of thing she saw ahead.

>
One of the big nasty things they were fighting - Venus could not tell

>if it was a Droid or a Daimon at this distance - was choking the life
out of someone. Giving a tap to her communicator, Venus kept running

>while she talked. It was all well and good to plan on attacking as a
team, but when one of her adoring fans - everyone loved Sailor Venus,

>didn't they - was being killed, she could not afford to wait around.

>"Everyone! I've found the bad guys. I'm about a block from the station,
and you had better get here fast. This looks like a job for... SAILOR

>VENUS!"

>Had she kept her communicator open any longer, Sailor Venus would have
heard her team mates advising her to caution, but that was not

>something she could wait for. She needed to act, and she needed to do
it now. Waiting would only make things worse.

>
* * *

>
When Ranma came to, she realised she was lying down with her head

>resting on something warm and comfortable. At the same time, a gentle
hand was brushing her hair back from her eyes, soothing her brow with a

>soft touch that seemed to fill her with energy and make all her pain
disappear.

>
Reality returned to her with a shocking thump, and Ranma's eyes flashed

>open in horrid realisation. Looking straight up, she found herself
staring upside down at a pair of big pair of big, concerned looking

>purple eyes, framed by a golden tiara across the girl's brow.

>"H-Hotaru..." Ranma had a distinctly sinking feeling that she knew
where her head was resting.

>
With a voice that managed to sound relieved despite the exhaustion,

>Hotaru smiled down at her. "I... I'm glad... I was trying to heal you,
but you were unconscious and I..."

>
With that final effort - and seeing that her idol had regained

>consciousness - Hotaru's eyes rolled up into her head and she slumped
sideways. Rolling over with the speed of a striking snake, Ranma caught

>the small magical girl before she hit the ground and placed her against
the side of a building to rest. The last thing she could clearly

>remember was passing out as she flew through the air from the

Droid's
heavy blow. That meant that Hotaru must have caught her and healed her.

>Either of which would have taxed the small girl, but Hotaru was
determined, and if she could not defeat the Droid with her own attacks,

>she had decided to help Ranma so that she could fight in Hotaru's place.

>Gritting her teeth and standing up, Ranma took one last look at the
fainted girl and clenched her fists. Turning back to face the battle

>down the street, a green glow of anger and hatred began to flicker
around her body.

>
Regrettably, while she was out of it, things had gone from bad to worse.

>Her allies were all on the ropes or unable to attack. Worst of all,
Ukyo was in the clutches of the Droid, and did not look like she would

>be able to keep struggling much longer. Already the kicking of her feet
and the ineffectual way she clawed at the Droid that held her by the

>throat was weakening. Without air, Ukyo would surely die, and Ranma
would never allow that happen. She might not have been there to defend

>Akane, but she would be there for Ukyo, no matter what it cost.

>"Ryogaaaaa!" She called, running down the street full speed. If she
attacked fast enough, not even a magically powered Droid would be able

>to catch her. She had not managed it before, but if it was distracted
fighting both of them at once, she might just make it this time.

>
Ryoga was already glowing a bright enough green to be able to begin

>throwing Shi Shi Hokodans. If he could convince the boy to attack with
that power at the same time as he did, they would be able to take the

>plastic monstrosity apart like a Lego set.

>Every step Ranma took - even as Ryoga changed his stance to one for
fighting rather than throwing Ki blasts - she felt more confident that

>the would succeed. A few moments more would be all it took. Still half
a block away, Ranma suddenly heard words that chilled her to the bone.

>
"Droid! Kill her! Do not hesitate! We will take their energy and rise,

>more powerful than ever!"

>Even at her best speed, there was no way that Ranma could cross that
distance in time and save her fiancée. All it took was for the Droid to

>clench its fist, and Ukyo would be lying in a cold locker next to Akane,
never to make Okonomiyaki again. Forcing herself to move faster still,

>Ranma gathered herself for a jump, all the while knowing she was too
late to stop the inevitable.

>
Watching the red haired girl sprint towards it with surprising speed,

>the Droid did not feel worried. There was nothing that could be done.
Nothing could save the girl in its hand. Slowly, the Droid closed its

>chunky fingers around Ukyo's pale, slender throat until...

>Until a thin golden beam cut through the darkness of the street and the
plastic of the Droid with equal ease. As a cloud of black, burnt
>plastic smoke rose into the air, Ukyo fell down. The oversized toy hand
was still around her neck, but she could breath again.
Rolling to the
>side, Ukyo tried to ensure that she was anywhere other than where the
fighting was.
>
"I am the sailor-suited soldier, Sailor Venus. For picking on seriously
>cute boys like that, I'm going to punish you!"

>Ukyo had a moment to groan in irritation as she rolled away. She did

not make a conscious effort to dress like a boy these days. She had
>more important things to do that hiding her sex while plotting revenge;
she needed to woo Ranma. Despite that, old habits held, and people were
>still mistaking her for a boy, especially at a distance.

>Ukyo's decision to roll out of the way proved to be an incredibly

valuable one, since the moment she was gone, a pair of very angry

>martial artists closed on that space and began to show the startled

Droid exactly what they thought of it trying to strangle one of their
team members.

>Had the Droid still held Ukyo, it would have kept a valuable shield

that they would have been forced to dodge. Instead, it had gone from a
>position of strength to a position of weakness in a heartbeat.
Bereft
of its defence and missing a hand from the painful surprise attack, the
>Droid was disoriented, outnumbered and overwhelmed.

>Ranma was all over it like a rash. Rather than his previous attack that
relied on a single, powerful strike to take it down, Ranma was moving
>and striking like a horde of bees. None of the attacks bore the same

power and fury that Ryoga unleashed each time, but most of hers hit,
>and she could keep hitting like this for a long, long time.

>As Ranma distracted the Droid with blows that were hardly cracking the
armour, Ryoga closed for his own favourite close combat.
Hampered in
>its dodging by the nimble Ranma, Ryoga was blessed with an opponent who
was fast, but not able to avoid his attacks like was so often the case.
>Some of his blows missed, but each one that hit was sure to cause

misery.
>
Further back from the Droid, Sailor Venus cursed her luck. She was not
>sure if it was good or bad to have saved the pretty boy from the Droid,
since she immediately saw the two people that had attacked them and
>hurt her so badly previously. Now that she had more time to compare and
check her memory, Venus realised that the person she had saved was not
>really a cute stranger who would be overwhelmed by her presence and

might be convinced to be her boyfriend. Instead, it was one of

those

>nasty girls that had attacked them last time.

>Looking around at what she had stumbled onto, Venus involuntarily

backed up a step. She was no coward, but the prospect of fighting

>almost all of the Senshi's enemies at once was a bit much, even for her.
Not only were the couple they had assumed were Dark Kingdom generals

>here, but also all of their lesser minions. To all appearances, they

were facing off against Emerald and one of the Droids. They might have

>been losing before, but thanks to Venus' timely appearance and

contribution, they were definitely winning. All she needed now to

>complete her collection of enemies was for the Death Busters to turn up.
However, if they did that, Venus decided it might be time for her to

>start looking for a safer way to spend her evenings.

>Emerald - having fended off the human attacking her - was standing back
with an expression on her face like she had just bitten an apple and

>found half a worm. Sailor Senshi to one side, and these... These

inhumanly powerful humans to the other. There might only be one Senshi

>at the moment, but she had fought them often enough to know that you

could often find others nearby. She had been winning a moment ago, but

>now this... Her victory was reduced to ashes.

>That phrase became even more appropriate when a stream of fire boiled
down from a side street, impacting the Droid in the side and sending

>both of the attackers flying from the blast. The Mars Fire Soul should
not have been powerful enough to kill a Droid, but this one had been

>weakened by battle. Wounded by that nasty Sailor Venus, and brutalised
by those incomprehensible humans, the Droid caught alight and began

>screaming in pain.

>Giving a flick of her wrist, Emerald spread her fan and looked over it
at the boys standing on the road glaring at her. It was a shame to

>leave the field of battle, especially since there was obviously no lost
love between the Senshi and the humans, but she did not want to be

>between the two groups when they fought each other. Worse yet, both of
them might decide to attack her, and that might even be dangerous.

>
Giving a last, grand laugh, Emerald teleported away. There was no need

>to stay. This battle was lost, but she would win next time. She would
make sure of that.

>
As Sailor Mars closed in on Venus' left, other short skirted heroines

>appeared from nowhere, until the street was arrayed with them.

Venus,
Mars, Moon, Jupiter and Mercury. The forces of good stood side by side,

>hair and skirts gently moving in the evening breeze. From off to the
side, the flickering light of the lingering plastic fire that had once

>been the Droid bathed them in a ruddy glow, adding colour and

mystery
to their already stunning visage.

>
Forming up in their own team was the _other_ force for good. Led from

>the centre by a pair of boys who towered over their female companion,
they were flanked by more girls and a long haired boy off on the far

>side, opposite Sailor Mercury. Where the Senshi stood tall and proud,
noble looking in their fine clothes, the martial artists were all

>coiled and tight, ready to fight, their clothes no better than those
you would find on any common teenager.

>
Surprisingly enough, a faint green aura flickered around the small girl

>in the centre, and the large, bulky boy standing next to her. The
almost ethereal fire flickered and danced around their skin, and seemed

>to move in time with the looks of anger that distorted their faces.

>"P-Pig Tailed Girl! Say it is not so!"

>The tall boy caught the attention of everyone around them, momentarily
distracting the short redhead, so that the green flames surrounding her

>began to gutter. "What's that?"

>"These... These fine specimens... These... These astoundingly pretty
soldiers... Pig Tailed Girl, tell me that these are not our dread

>enemies!"

>Ranma gave herself a moment to look at her enemies as people, rather
than murdering scum, and decided that perhaps Kuno was right. The

>Sailor Senshi were not a bad looking bunch. Some of them might even
give Shampoo a run for her money in a beauty contest. Be that as it may,

>that did not make any difference. While their outsides might be as
beautiful as the lilies covering a pond, underneath that pond was

>filled with darkness, corruption and scum willing to kill his fiancée.

>"They're bad guys all right. When you look at them, just remember that
their the ones responsible for killin' Akane. If it weren't for them,

>you might be on a date with her right now." The thought of that made
Ranma ill, and she knew that it was about as likely as her learning how

>to fly, but she needed to keep Kuno focused on winning the battle.

>For a moment the leader of the Senshi looked as though she was going to
say something, but Kuno beat her to the punch. Moving with a speed that

>he only exhibited when chasing the girls he professed to love, Kuno
crossed the space separating the teams faster than Sailor Moon could

>utter a single word.

>In an instant, the great Blue Thunder, Scion to the House of Kuno, and
heir to their mighty fortune clasped the two most beautiful of the

>pretty soldiers to his firm, manly chest. As he spoke, he could feel
his lady loves begin to swoon against him, overcome by his words of

>love, if not for their simple proximity to his magnificence.

>"You are my Venus! You are my fire! What's you desire?"

>Ranma and Ryoga's mouths fell open in astonishment. They had been

barely able to touch the Senshi in a fight, but Kuno had just
managed
>to catch two of them, and they seemed unable to escape his octopus

embrace. Ranma could testify just how difficult that could be,
but she
>was still surprised that it worked on the Senshi.

>Baring her teeth and setting her face into a ferocious frown that

looked almost comically cute, Ranma yelled. "Get them!"

>
Acting like a starter's gun for both sides, the two forces ran
at each
>other, projectiles flying between them. Ki, spatulas and chains
crossed
against lightning and ice, while Sailor Moon charged the
short girl,
>oddly glad that for once that she had found an enemy that was not

taller than her.
>
Meanwhile, as most of the Inner Senshi charged into glorious
combat
>against their foes, Mars and Venus struggled against the man that
held
them in his embrace. "Let me go, you pervert! Let me go!"

>
"Ah, but truly, this must be a match made in the heavens! I, the
great
>and noble son of a proud samurai line, have come to lead you from
the
darkness and corruption that has led you into error. For
without doubt,
>it would fall upon a man such as I to have a heart great enough to

bathe you in the love that you need."
>
Pausing dramatically while crashes and explosions rang about
him, Kuno
>looked to the sky and wept. "Oh, but the trial, the tribulations,
the
enormities which do beset me! How could it be that I have
found not one,
>but two such beauties, deserving of my love and needing of my deft
and
brilliant guidance? Clapsed within my right arm, I see none
other than
>my blonde goddess, surely fairer than the goddess Venus herself! And
lo,
snuggled gently against my other side, another suitor. One
possessed of
>fire and spirit, energy and vitality!"

>"Though you come to me, as quiet and shy as maidens, modest and

nameless, I, the mighty Blue Thunder shall comfort and protect
you. I
>shall watch over you for the rest of your days, as we live in divine

bliss together. But yet... Without names, we are naught by
fleeting
>shadows on the canvas of the world! So let it be! From this day
forth,
let it be known by all that you are my suitors, named by
myself."
>
"To you, fair haired lady, idol to all whom may behold her, you
I shall
>name Venus, in honour of the Goddess Venus. For while Aphrodite may

have driven me to the same temptation you do, all acknowledge
Venus as
>the most beautiful in the heavens!"

>"And you, whom so coyly pretends to struggle, my raven haired
beauty,
know that I can see your true heart, and I feel its

desire beat in time

>with my own. You I shall name Spirit Of Fire! For I can feel the heat,
the warmth, the power in your spirit!"

>
"Oh, my dears, from this moment forth, let none separate us from our---

>Urk!"

>The tall teenager slumped to the ground, finally releasing Sailors
Venus and Mars from his grasp. Shuddering slightly in relief from being

>freed, the girls looked up at Tuxedo Kamen and smiled gratefully.

"Thanks, Tuxedo Kamen. I don't think I could have coped with that for

>much longer."

>Lowering his cane from where he had bonked Kuno on the head, the
aforementioned hero bowed graciously and smiled.

>
"My pleasure, Sailor Mars. But I have to ask... Why didn't you just hit

>him like I did?"

>"He may not look it, but that guy is really strong." Venus blushed
slightly. "Besides, it's hard to shoot someone with a Crescent Beam

>when all they're doing is hugging you and declaring that they love
you."

>
Reluctantly, Mars nodded. "She's right. And it's not as though he was

>as bad as half of the bad guys we meet. I don't know whether to be
insulted or relieved that he held us like that and didn't even try to

>have a grope. Relieved, I guess... But..."

>"There is no time to think of that, Sailor Mars. I fear Mercury is
suffering at the hands of that boy with the large spatula, and Sailor

>Jupiter is not doing much better. You go and help them, and I shall
save Sailor Moon!"

>
"Right!" Chorused the girls before spinning on their heels and racing

>to their team mates. The masked man barely managed to take a step on
his own quest before a cough caught his attention. Turning back, he saw

>the man he had struck earlier. Such a blow from his cane should have
rendered anyone unconscious; the only reason Tuxedo Kamen had not

>feared killing the man was the fact that he was consorting with their
enemies, and therefore likely aligned with evil himself.

>
"That did not hurt."

>
Behind his mask, Tuxedo Kamen's eyes goggled. Was this man even human?

>What sort of a person could take such a blow and not even be hurt? He
had fought Youma to a standstill before, and had not needed more

>strength then.

>Lifting his head proudly, Kuno pulled out his spare bokken and traced a
circle in front of him, ending with one hand held high, pointing to the

>sky. "You would dare to separate me from the women I love? So be it!
Let the vengeance of heaven descend up you! Know now that the one you

>face is undefeated in any battle! Every opponent I face, I arise
victorious! I have never been beaten in battle or game! I am...

The

>Blue Thunder Of Tokyo!"

>In a titanic crash, lightning surged down in front and behind the

kendoist, silhouetting him. At the same time as Sailor Jupiter
sent a

>Supreme Thunder at one of her foes, blue lightning raced from the

evening sky to flash against the background of the city. All in
all, it

>was a terrifying sight, and as the wooden blade lowered to point at

Tuxedo Kamen, he realised that he must now be facing the true
leader of

>the enemy forces. Someone powerful enough to command the elements
like
Sailor Jupiter, the strength of Queen Beryl, with the
charisma and

>presence of Prince Diamond all rolled into one.

>Raising his cane so that it was pointed at the man in the classical

sword fighting attire, Tuxedo Kamen hoped he was not making a big

>mistake. If this man truly was their leader as he suspected, Tuxedo

Kamen would not stand much chance of defeating him without Sailor

>Moon's help. However, he was certain he would be able to hold him
long
enough for the Senshi to be able to reorganise and begin to
fight back

>properly.

>Sighting over his bokken, the Blue Thunder laughed at his opponent.

"You would seek to master me in the art of the sword? I, who has
no

>master? Very well, commoner. For now you shall surely learn your
place
in the scheme of things."

>
With his bokken brought back in a cross cut position, Kuno knew
that

>this was what he had been born for. All his victories over the
sorcerer
Saotome were just training for this day. Surely no rose
as beautiful

>and precious as his loves could possibly be the evil that the Pig

Tailed Girl has spoken of. That only left one option... This vile

>serpent in front of him must be enslaving his loves for his own

purposes!

>
"Know this foul varmint! By defeating you, I shall free those
whom you

>have enslaved to your evil and twisted mind. When I defeat you, my

beloved Venus and darling Spirit Of Fire shall be free to date
with

>me!"

>Charging forwards Kuno lashed out with a speed born of years of

practice. Fighting Ranma for so many months may not have brought
him

>the victories he believed, but it did give him the advantage of
losing
against one of the greatest martial artists in Japan.
Once, twice or

>three times a day, Kuno would go all out, attempting to free those
he
believed Ranma held captive. While he may not have won the
battle, he

>had fought and improved constantly.

>Against someone as nimble and unpredictable as Ranma, Kuno was
unable
to win. Against someone fighting within the strictures
imposed by

>orthodox sword techniques, Kuno's skill and his own speed was enough

to
offset Tuxedo Kamen's magical advantage. With strength, tenacity and a
>brainless idiot's ability to ignore pain, the Blue Thunder kept Tuxedo
Kamen on the ropes.
>
The rest of the battle was not doing well, for either side. Out-

>numbered and out-skilled initially, the Senshi had taken a nasty
beating. Sailor Moon was largely unhurt due to an unlikely combination
>of incredible luck and astounding clumsiness that moved her out of the
way of almost every major attack. Ryoga had made a special effort to
>destroy the girl for what she had done, but her uncanny ability to be
somewhere other than where he attacked was rapidly wearing down his
>patience. While he was more capable of throwing Ki attacks from the
frustration, his inability to get his hands on the girl was beginning
>to degrade his skill.
>Sailor Mercury was not so lucky. While she managed to hold off the two
bigger girls - the one armed with spatulas and the one armed with what
>looked like baby rattles - she had done so at a cost. Bruised, battered
and almost broken beyond repair, Sailor Mercury was preparing for the
>final curtain. As she felt her left knee give out from a brutal strike
from the brown haired girl, Mercury gave a cry of pain and closed her
eyes.
>She knew that this would be the end, and only regretted that she would
not be there to help Sailor Moon next time they fought. Then, before
>either of her attackers could land the killing blow, twin streams of
energy cascaded over her head. Caught unawares, both Shampoo and Ukyo
were catapulted backwards, away from the blue haired Senshi who
promptly collapsed unconscious.
>
While the Senshi did not have the skill levels of the martial artists,
>their magical attacks more than made up for it in power. A Senshi or a
martial artist who was struck by a normal blow would be sent reeling,
>but they could fight on. When an ordinary person was hit by the furious
energies contained in one of the Senshi's magical attacks, it could be
>lethal. However, neither of the girls that were hit could be considered
ordinary by any measure.
>
Thus, rather than having a pair of fried corpses littering the street,
>all Sailors Venus and Mars managed to accomplish was a pair of knock-
outs. Mercury was down and out, but so were two of the fighters.
>
While Ranma took on Sailor Jupiter, Mousse was also busy. Bereft of his
glasses early in the fight - before the Senshi even arrived - Mousse
was impaired only in direction, not effectiveness. Thus, using every
weapon in his arsenal, Mousse taught a store dummy a lesson that it
would never forget.
>
Ranma, contrary to what she had expected, was having the fight

of her
>life and loving it.

>Knowing that Sailor Mercury was the weakest, Ranma had sent his friends
after her, hoping for an overwhelming victory. It had not come out that
>way, but while he kept tabs on them, Shampoo and Ukyo did manage to

defeat the girl without being unduly hurt. Or so it seemed right up
until the end.

>With Ryoga and Mousse occupied, Ranma had attacked the green skirted

girl. Unlike the rest of the Senshi, this girl knew how to fight. She
>might have the devil's own time hitting Ranma with her lightning, but
when Ranma closed in; the girl's skill made it a nightmare fight.
>Sailor Jupiter was quick, nimble and athletic. She was skilled in

fighting, and practiced at dealing out damage to anyone that cared to
>take her on; as a Senshi or otherwise. But the difference between

Ranma's skill and Kino Makoto's was enormous. Makoto was good. Ranma
>was great. The difference between Ranma's ability and Sailor Jupiter's
was marginal. It was also marginally in favour of the Senshi.
>
Since Ranma had been a little boy, she had fought opponents who were
>often better than her. It was only recently that Ranma had reached his
current level and had been able to take on all comers. She could
>remember so many times when she had fought her father as a child. Those
were the fights she remembered and loved the most. Not the ones where
>she won easily - like her current training - but back in the days when
she would lose. Ranma did not like losing, but she _loved_ improving,
>striving, and pushing just that little bit further to defeat a superior
opponent.
>
Sailor Jupiter was such an opponent. No matter what Ranma dished out,
>she came back for more. Kicks, punches, throws and strikes. They all

hurt, but the big girl would get back up again after every one of them.
>In exactly the same manner, when Jupiter showed the advantage of her

superior reach or magical speed, Ranma would be thrown into a wall or
>bashed into the ground, but she would get up again.

>As the minutes ticked by and Mercury was worn down beside them, Sailor

Jupiter and Ranma began to question who would walk away from the battle
>between the two of them. Both of them bore more cuts and scrapes than

you would get wrestling an electric cheese grater. Ranma's right eye
>was swollen and half lidded from a hay maker that caught her square on

the face, but that was countered by the stiff way Jupiter held her side,
>courtesy of Ranma's counter strike.

>Giving a grin that was more cockiness and bluster than real energy,

Ranma gestured to where Shampoo and Ukyo were about to put the final
>touches on Sailor Mercury. "Looks like we've got you on the ropes

now."

>Speaking too soon, Ranma's allies flew backwards in a 4th of July

pyrotechnics display. "Heh... You'll never beat the Sailor
Senshi!"

>
"Damn!" Another Senshi, the blonde that had shot him across the
back

>last time, was coming to join them.

>"One, two or ten. I'll take you all on." Spitting a little blood
from
her mouth, Ranma fixed her stance, took a deep breath and
prepared to

>dodge. Behind her enemies, she could see Ryoga beginning to make
hard
work of it for Sailor Mars. Fortunately Sailor Moon was not
doing much,

>or the lost boy would have been in trouble.

>The blonde frowned prettily at Ranma and ran a hand across the side
of
her face. "I still haven't had a chance to get you back for
what you

>did to my nose! That's a rotten thing to do to a face as pretty as
mine.
VENUS CRESCENT BEAM SMASH!"

>
There. That was what Ranma had been waiting on. As the arm came
up,

>Ranma knew she would only have one chance at this. If she could get

inside the girl's guard quickly enough, she would be able to make
a

>repeat of last time they fought. Already moving as the girl began to

speak, Ranma bent low as she ran and kept one eye carefully on
the

>Senshi in green.

>Sailor Jupiter could not move quickly enough to stop Ranma's attack,

but the redhead had not counted on how much her own injuries
slowed her

>movements. Venus might not have been a fighter like Jupiter and able
to
read the martial artist's actions to get more warning, but her
magic

>enhancements were just as potent. She brought her elbow down on
Ranma's
back, just as the red-haired girl was coming in to abuse
her undefended

>stomach.

>Dropping like a sack of potatoes, Ranma found herself looking at the

tip of an orange shoe as she struggled to draw air into her
lungs. Her

>back felt like it had been broken in five hundred places, but past

experience told her all that pain was a good thing. If she had
taken a

>blow that heavy and not felt anything... That would have been the
real
time to worry.

>
While the sounds of two swordsmen duelling with wooden weapons
reported

>across the battlefield like a machinegun, Ranma tried to pull
herself
up. She tried, she honestly did, but her muscles felt
slow and sluggish.

>She had barely reached her knees when she looked up and caught the

faces of two very, very unhappy looking girls.

>
"This is going to be the last time you or your friends ever
attack us."

>
"You've got that right."

>
Heads whipped around all over the battlefield at the sound of
the new

>voice. Young, but commanding. Scared, but dedicated and firm. The
voice
had all the trademarks of the legendary and terrifying

Sailor Saturn,
>including - but not limited to - a small girl in a dark skirted
sailor
suit holding an enormous pole arm.
>
"I learnt this one from Ranma-san's father... And if we can't
win any
>other way, I'll use it to end this battle for good! Utilising all
the
power of the Anything Goes Secret Technique, prepare yourself
for..."
>
As Hotaru spoke, everyone stopped to listen, even the battling
Tuxedo
>Kamen and Kuno. At her words, most of the Nerima martial artists'
faces
began to glow with recognition. The Saotome Secret
Technique might not
>be subtle, but it certainly worked. When the Senshi saw the attack's

morale effect on the girl's allies as she prepared for it, they
could
>only believe that the Silence Glaive's power would be multiplied

greatly
>
Kuno was unfortunately the only person on their side unfamiliar
with
>the irresistible power of the technique, but in this, he was helped
by
Tuxedo Kamen. The masked defended was well versed in the power
of
>Sailor Saturn, and Usagi had previously told him all about her

dangerous nature. If the girl was going to unleash some horrible
attack,
>the only thing he could do was try and save his lady-love from
whatever
hideous effects it might have.
>
As the blade of the Silence Glaive swung down and Sailor Saturn
called
>out her attack, Tuxedo Kamen abandoned his fight with the enemy

mastermind and sprinted to Sailor Moon. Moving at speeds even he
rarely
>displayed, he scooped her into his arms and immediately reversed
course.

>"ANYTHING GOES SILENCE GLAIVE SECRET TECHNIQUE!"

>As one, the Senshi covered the faces and braced themselves. They
might
not survive the attack, but they would die trying.
>
A gentle wind blew down the street.
>
In the distance, a bird squawked.
>
The traffic on Yasukuni-dori rumbled nearby.
>
Sailor Mars slowly lowered her arms. "W-What was that?"

>
Venus: "I... I don't know... I don't feel any different..."

>
From where she had tripped and landed on her bottom, Sailor
Jupiter
>looked up. "I don't get it... I don't think it did anything at
all."

>Up on a building, where Tuxedo Kamen had lifted her to hopeful
safety,
the leader of the Senshi looked down on her fellows.
"WAAH!!! They got
>away!"

>Of course, a Kuno would not flee from any battle, no matter how
great
the odds may be. On the other hand, when he saw himself
alone on the
>street while everyone else retreated and left him facing all the
enemy,
the great Kuno Tatewaki felt a sudden urge to go and
remonstrate his
>comrades for such cowardly action.

>Thus, while Kuno did not flee from the bemused Senshi, he did quietly
slip into the shadows and took advantage of the confusion to leave.

>
* * *

>
The week passed with great rapidity and sureness. Everyone's greatest enemy, time, pressed on with less care for mortal's wishes than a
Senshi and more power than an entire army of Daimons. Time was Ranma's enemy as surely as anyone else in Tokyo, since every day was torture
while Akane lay unavenged and Tokyo was left prey to the murderous minions stalking her streets.

>As much as Ranma may have wished to disagree with his father's and
Cologne's words on the subject, he could not. After his friends recent defeat against the Senshi he could hardly deny that they were not able
to win a stand-up battle at the moment. Thinking back to what he had seen, he could not refute it, but he would also not accept the concept
of defeat. It was a setback, and that was all.

>
The setback was precisely why time ticked over so quickly. If everyone was as great as Saotome Ranma, they would have been able to defeat the
Senshi. Of course, who could possibly be as great as Saotome Ranma, other than the man (or woman) himself?

>Going through his Kata, Ranma grinned and answered his own question:
everyone. Everyone in this yard would be as good as Saotome Ranma was...

>They would be as good as he was when they fought the Senshi, but they
would never catch him. For every hour his friends trained, he would train two. For every battle they fought, he would fight two. For
everyone fight they lost, he would win one. That was the true path to success. Forget what his father said, what mattered was who wanted it
more. To Ukyo or Shampoo, this was a matter of pride, but if he was not there, they would soon let it go, and hope someone else would settle
things. Mousse was the same, only dedicated to Shampoo. Ryoga approached him in his conviction, but Ranma knew in his heart of hearts
that Ryoga would not be the one to win this war.

>
Having watched the fight, Ranma was no longer certain he understood Kuno's motivations. Ever since he had known him, Kuno had just been a
blowhard annoyance. When he went up against the Senshi's groupie, he had demonstrated so much more than that. For the first time in his life,
Ranma witnessed just how dangerous the Kuno fanaticism could be when directed against someone of lesser ability than himself.

>If only they could convince him to get rid of the pictures of Sailor
Venus and Sailor Mars that he insisted on carrying around with him now.

>
Battered by magic or beaten by fists, everyone in Ranma's little troupe had been feeling the worse for wear. Even Kuno - the man who defined

the comment "no brain, no pain" - was a wreck afterwards. Taking it

>easy was out of the question since there were lives at stake, but

Nabiki pointed out that they did not necessarily have to tackle

>everything head on. He smirked as he remembered how she had led them

all by the nose to the conclusion she had wanted.

>
"Come on, Ranma. You don't have butt heads with every bad guy you find,

>do you?"

>"Yes." Was the answer from every martial artist in the room, including
Genma.

>
"No, no, no. You have to keep your eye on the target. Always remember

>what you set out to do. It's just the same as in business. Now, what

were your goals when you started this?"

>
"To get revenge for Akane." Ryoga's low growl was full of emotion, and

>it was not hard to guess which emotion.

>"And?..." Nabiki prompted.

>"To make sure no-one else suffers the way she did."

>"Exactly. Now... Just say that you spent the next few weeks rescuing

people, rather than fighting the Senshi and the Death Busters. A week

>from now, you'll all be better fighters, and no-one would have suffered
like Akane..."

>
"People would still get hurt, Nabiki. We can't save everyone."

>
"You're right, Ukyo. But what happens if Sailor Moon zaps you with her

>Moon Mindless Medication or whatever? Who's going to save the world

then?"

>
So it was said, so it shall be done. As Nabiki had pointed out, by

>splitting up into several groups, they could each cover more territory.
Also, since they had no chance of winning, they took fewer risks. Fast

>in an out, rescue the damsel in distress and come back for a late night
snack.

>
While their wounds had healed, the fighters had kept pushing themselves,

>striving to be better. They might not be able to take on Emerald and

the Droids, one of the Death Busters, or a group of Sailor Senshi, but

>they could certainly put a hole in their plans. As Ranma was willing to
testify, tweaking someone's nose to make them mad was almost as much

>fun as fighting them for real.

>That was how they had come to their current state. Less than a week had
passed since the battle, but now all of the vigilantes were fully

>healed and ready for trouble. Under Genma's none-too-gentle guidance,
the teenagers had found that trouble at home, rather than going out and

>looking for it.

>Ranma was working his way through a relaxing kata that most black belts
would have balked at when Ryoga's shout of joy drew him, and everyone

>else in the area, to where the lost boy was practicing. Anything that
could make Ryoga happy was something worth finding out

about.

>
* * *

>
Looking into the fire that was his eternal enemy, Ryoga clenched his

>fists and concentrated even harder. It was two weeks since Ryoga had

started to learn the Kachuu Tenshin Amaguriken, and every time he came

>close to victory, that fiendish, devilish Saotome would make it harder

for him. In some ways it surprised him that the elder Saotome could be

>as wilfully cruel as his prior nemesis, but Ryoga guessed that Ranma

must have learned it from somewhere, and Genma made a great teacher on

>that subject.

>Just when Ryoga was almost able to grab the chestnuts from the fire and

prove his speed was as good as Ranma's, Genma would pile more wood on

>the fire. Of course, this made it hot further out, and hotter at the

centre where the chestnuts sat amongst the coals. Ryoga knew that Ranma

>never had it this hard when he was trying to learn, but that just

proved how much better Ryoga was. His arms had been singed bare more

>times that he could count, and he had lost his eyebrows on more than

one occasion, but Ryoga would not give in. Anything Ranma could master,

>he could too.

>So it was that Ryoga was standing in front of a small bonfire. Flames

reached above his head, and Ranma's father stood back several meters to

>avoid the heat, but Ryoga simply ignored it, concentrating on his goal.

He would catch those chestnuts! He would catch them all!

>
Flexing his hands once more, Ryoga leaned forwards slightly, then

>struck. Hands moving at speeds that they started to blur, Ryoga reached

in, grabbed the sizzling chestnuts and piled them on the ground beside

>him. Forcing himself to go just that little faster, to ignore the heat

just a little longer, Ryoga finally reached in and pulled out the last

>chestnut, dropping it too the ground beside him.

>For a moment he held there, shocked by his success. He had done it...

He had really done it... "I DID IT!!!!!"

>
Grinning from ear to ear, and showing a set of fangs the average

>vampire would envy, Ryoga stood with one fist raised into the sky as

Genma slowly nodded and looked smug. One-by-one the rest of the

>household arrived, crowding around the bonfire, asking what the

commotion was about.

>
"I did it! I finally mastered the Kachuu Tenshin Amaguriken!"

>
The girls - the real girls at any rate - started clapping, but Ranma

>simply frowned. Putting on a girly pout, Ranma pointed at him and tried

to steal his glory. "Come on, Ryoga. You'll never be fast enough to do

>the Roasting Chestnuts Over An Open Fire."

>Ryoga snorted. "Admit it, Ranma, you're just jealous that I'm better

than you are. You've never done it in a fire that large! I bet you

>couldn't even get them out."

>"Ha! Just try me. It's not how big the fire is that matters, it's how
quick you grab them."

>
"Fine then! Get these out!"

>
Ryoga tossed a fresh packet of nuts onto the fire and crossed his arms

>over his chest. Acting just like a girl, despite his present form,

Ranma was standing as far back as everyone else, obviously afraid of

>the fire. Suddenly Ryoga's confidence was shattered. Before his eyes,
Ranma seemed to blur. One moment he was standing next to Kasumi, next

>he was right up next to the fire, his arms not even visible. So quick
that a watcher would have missed it if they blinked, Ranma was back

>where he had been, offering Kasumi a freshly roasted chestnut.

>"Thank you, Ranma-kun."

>"See, Ryoga. That's how it's done. Don't tell me you can do that."

>"Humph! Just watch me." Snarling, Ryoga hurled yet another packet of
nuts onto the fire. Grinning at Ranma across the heat haze, Ryoga moved.

>
Seconds later, Ryoga had retreated from the worst of the fire's heat

>and smugly held up his own catch. Naturally, everyone was staring at
him with stunned expressions, most of them were too shocked to speak,

>let alone move. Obviously Ryoga had showed them just how much faster he
really was, and they had missed his performance.

>
Surprisingly, the first person to move was little Hotaru.

Skirting

>around the fire, she came in close and took one of Ryoga's hands,

turning it over in one of her own. His hand - so much larger than hers

>- was scarred and weathered. It was thick, calloused and powerful.

It
was, however, completely unburned.

>
"I... I don't understand..."

>
In the stunned silence, finally Ranma found his voice. "T-That was not

>the Amaguriken... I don't know what it was, but it sure wasn't the
Chestnut Fist."

>
"Shut up, Ranma! You're just jealous because I've finally shown

>everyone I'm better than you are."

>For a moment, Ryoga was tempted to go over and show Ranma that he
really was the fastest now, when he caught sight of everyone else's

>faces. None of them were disagreeing with Ranma. Even Cologne was
sitting there, surprised, but nodding to what Ranma said.

>
Quietly, so softly it could hardly be heard over the fire, a cough was

>heard. "Perhaps I did not myself sufficiently clear when I started this
training."

>
Now Genma had everyone's attention, and he was loving it. "I never said

>I was going to teach him the Chestnut Fist... Well, maybe I did, but

that was just a little misdirection. All I really wanted to teach him
>was enough to get his nuts out of the fire... So to speak."

>If they had been confused by Ryoga's lacklustre speed before, they were

baffled now. What was the use of the training if not for the speed.
>Genma enjoyed their confusion for a few moments, drinking it like a

fine wine, until he saw enlightenment appear on Cologne's
withered
>visage. Understanding and even a measure of respect.

>"Ryoga, step to your left... No, your other left. Good. Now another

step."
>
Awe and comprehension flashed across everyone's faces now. When

>confronted with facts this evident, even the slowest people could

understand. "What? What's going on?" Well, Ryoga was an
exceptional
>case.

>"Look where you're standing boy."

>Looking down, Ryoga noticed that he had one foot in the fire, but it

did not even hurt. Nonetheless, he gave a yelp of surprise and
jumped
>away. Cologne spoke up, saving everyone from having to wait all
night
before Genma decided to speak plainly.
>
"In much the same way the Bakusai Tenketsu gave you incredible

>tolerance to physical beating, this man's training has given you the

same tolerance for heat. Yes... With all his speed, Son-In-Law
never
>needed this resilience. While you might not have his speed, I can
see
this will be of great benefit to you."
>
"What?! You mean I've been wasting my time? What use is being
able to
>stand in a fire going to be for me?"

>"Foolish boy," Genma's voice rang out. Ryoga might not be his son,
but
he abused him just as much in training. "Does not one of the
Senshi
>rely on fire for her attacks? What need do you have of fearing her

now?"
>
Genma drew a deep breath and continued "Answer me in truth
boy... What
>do you need to fear from her now that her main weapon is impotent

against you?"
>
Slowly, comprehension seeped through Ryoga's thick skull.
Starting
>slowly Ryoga began to chuckle, which quickly ascended into a full
blown,
evil sounding belly laugh that rang off against the
compound walls. The
>prospect of doing battle with the Senshi again and being immune to

their attacks while they fell to his insurmountable speed and
power
>struck the lost boy as immensely funny.

>* * *

>Kuno Kodachi, the Black Rose of Saint Hebereke High School, walked

through the rooms of her massive house and gently ran the fingers
of
>one hand over the surface of a table. There was no dust here, that

would never be allowed. This might be one of the restricted rooms

that

>her brother had told her was off limits to her, but even he would not
stop the cleaning staff from doing their job.

>
Stepping gracefully to the left, Kodachi avoided a descending battle

>axe as it swung through where she had just been standing. They might
lose a few cleaners each year who did not pay enough attention to where

>the traps were located, but that was not an issue that she was overly
worried about. As long as the house remained clean, that was the main

>thing.

>She had been looking through the house all afternoon because she was
sure she had heard voices and the sounds of an intruder. No-one, as far

>as she knew, was either impertinent enough or stupid enough to try and
break into the Kuno mansion. No-one aside from the pig-tailed strumpet,

>but her brother was off courting her.

>For a moment Kodachi shivered at the idea of having someone as
despicable as that pig-tailed girl in her family, but she quickly

>stopped. While her dear brother might lust after her now, she knew that
his desires would be easily sated when he finally caught her. Her

>brother was such a simpleton, it was a wonder that he had the brain
power to chase two girls at once... Surely that was why he failed to

>catch either of them, since any normal peasant out there would
immediately fall for the Kuno charm, in just the same way that her

>Ranma-sama had.

>Kodachi had nothing against the pig-tailed girl personally.

Naturally,
since the girl was in a completely different social class to the Kuno

>family, it would not be fitting for Kodachi to bear her a grudge.

The
fact that the girl took her beloved Ranma's name, mocked his manly ways

>by dressing the same, and continually cheated in every endeavour to
keep Kodachi and Ranma-sama apart; these things were all beneath

>Kodachi's notice. She simply hated the girl as an annoying insect,
nothing more.

>
Mind you, if a terrible, horrific and exceptionally painful "accident"

>were to befall the pig-tailed girl, Kodachi promised herself that she
would not celebrate for more than a week. You can't get more generous

>and magnanimous than that, surely.

>Sweeping through the house in a floor length black gown - over her
gymnastics uniform - Kodachi looked like a text book example of a well

>bred member of the upper classes. Her walk was soft and graceful. Her
poise perfect and collected. Her laugh loud, insane and grating, but

>politely concealed behind one upraised hand. Image, as anyone could
tell you, was everything.

>
She had just passed the third bathroom complex in the West Wing of the

>Kuno mansion when she noticed something amiss. While the builders

had
been very careful, she knew from previous experience that there should
>have been a trap in the area that she just walked through. She was not
sure if it was the vial of knockout gas, or if it was the trapdoor that
>released the army of Brazilian ants, but she knew this passage was
supposed to be trapped. If the builders had been through here recently,
>then it must mean that the disturbance she had heard came from this
area.
>
Looking around, Kodachi tried to find what was amiss in her home. This
>might be the section of the house that her elder brother had told her
never to come, on pain of complete excommunication and loss of the
>family fortune, but she could remember it well from her weekly visits.
Oddly enough, she knew this area of the house better than any other,
>simply because of the fact that she had been told not to come here.

>Casting around, she catalogued things mentally, checking them off
against a list in her mind. Moat outside the window, filled with

>piranha... Check. Thirteenth century marble flooring, laid in a
checkerboard fashion, land mines every first and third square... Check.
>Edo era hand carved table with an original copy of Musashi's memoirs...
Check. Ornate, black statue of a lady done in flawless crystal...
>Check...

>A frown crossed her brow for a moment. It was only brief, since Kodachi
was well aware that frowning caused lines, and she would not want to be
>any less than her current perfection for her Ranma-sama. That statue
was new. She could have sworn that it was not there last time she had
>visited.

>Walking closer, Kodachi took a seat on another priceless piece of
furniture from Japan's history and looked at the statue more closely.
>There was no doubt that it was fine work, and the quality of the dark
crystal alone would make it valuable, but she could not understand why
>it was here. This was her brother's special section of the house. He
had not contaminated it with pictures of either of the trollops, but
>for some reason he cherished this wing more than he was willing to say.
For him to bring in a new statue like this was very strange.

>
She could have understood it if the statue was of Tendo Akane or that
>pig-tailed girl, that would have simply been a weakening of his will.
But this woman... This woman was tall, mature... Not as elegant as
>Kodachi herself, but the woman of the statue carried herself with a
certain air that befitted nobility.
>
Resting one hand upon the crystal, the Black Rose was surprised to find
>it slightly warm to the touch. "Interesting... Where did you come from,
I wonder? Most thieves do not break in and leave expensive

statues for
>the owners."

>Turning the statue one way then another, Kodachi continued on with
her
thoughts, missing the way that a small purple ring began to
pulse on
>the ground under the statue. "I believe I do remember the last time
a
thief broke into my beloved home. This was before I met my
beloved and
>could count on him to defend me at all times of the day and night.

Yes... At that time, I was all alone, just myself and my pretty
pet,
>Midorigame-san. I do believe I was quite frightened at the
time."

>With nothing more to do than while away her time in quiet
recollection,
Kodachi reminisced about how she had lured the
burglar through the
>house. Initially she led him through a safe path, then she gave him
a
good scare with one of the bottomless pits near the heart of
the house.
>As the poor man scampered and ran, trying to escape, he triggered

almost every trap they possessed.
>
Surely the thief must have been very skilled at his trade, for
while he
>was heavily wounded by the time he had stepped onto the grounds
outside
again, he was still alive. That was, he lasted a little
while longer,
>since he unfortunately took a wrong turn and ended up in
Midorigame's
pond. Could there possibly be a cuter name for a
massive, hungry
>crocodile than Midorigame?

>Her story finished, Kodachi focused back on the here and now.
Blinking
her eyes, Kodachi tried to reconcile what she saw with
what she
>remembered. Normally she did not have any problem with that. Ever
since
she realised it was better to test your psychotropic
poisons on your
>brother than on yourself, she had not been prone to those annoying

hallucinations. But now... She could have sworn that the statue
had
>grown while she had been talking to it.

>"Interesting..." Placing a finger on her lip, she pondered the

possibilities. "I wonder if you enjoy happy tales as much as I
do. I
>know that my beautiful black roses grow when you talk softly to
them.
When you tell the joy of fighting your opponents, of
beating them in a
>fair fight while they lie sleeping in bed... My word... I think even

that got a little reaction... I must try this some more."

>
Settling back, Kodachi's eyes shone with enthusiasm. She had a
new pet
>project, and the Black Rose of Saint Hebereke was famous for making

things grow.
>
* * *
>
Puffing slightly, Shampoo leaned on her bonbori, wiping sweat
from her
>face with her other hand. "Spatula Girl much better than
before."

>Ukyo made a face halfway between a smile and a grimace. She was not

sure whether to thank the Amazon, hit her for the annoying

nickname or

>just groan in pain after hours of all-out training. "Thanks. You're not
too shabby yourself, Honey."

>
"Is only right. Shampoo great Amazon. Shampoo train all life to be

>great fighter."

>"Fighting against the ocean for a decade is no rest cure either."

>There was a brief silence then. Both girls knew how they fared against
each other. They knew all too well. Both Cologne and Genma agreed that

>either of them fighting Ranma or Ryoga was not going to gain too much,
so they tended to fight each other. The boys were too gentle on the

>girls to be really effective, and although Ryoga was behind Ranma for
speed, even he could make the girls look slow. Kuno might have been a

>good match, but oddly he did not seem to do much practice. He spent his
time in either meditation or slow katas. That seemed to get results for

>him, and that was what mattered.

>"Is good thing Spatula Girl can fight. Shampoo think Ai--- Ranma need
all help he get."

>
Four eyes flickered around, but there was sign of Ranma or Ryoga.

>Recently Ranma had not been reacting well when Shampoo called him her
husband. He was prone to storm off in an angry fit, the recent wound of

>Akane's death having once again been reopened by the comment. Ryoga on
the other hand would build up into a tower of fury and race around

>trying to kill Ranma, claiming that the pig-tailed martial artist was
already desecrating Akane's memory by chasing other girls. It might be

>great training, but it was hardly a boost to team morale.

>"You've got that right. I still can't believe how easily we got handed
our behinds last time... Mind you, it'll be different next time,

>right?"

>"Shampoo agree. Shampoo and Spatula Girl win when we fight girls again,
yes?"

>
Ukyo's hesitation was only the barest of margins. A month ago, she

>would have done anything to sabotage Shampoo's chance of getting closer
to Ranma. Anything that made Shampoo look bad would have made Ukyo look

>better. Now, things had changed. In today's world, if she helped
Shampoo bring the end to one of the people terrorising their city, both

>of them would be one step closer to freeing Ranma from the nightmare he
was living.

>
"You bet, Sugar. You bet. With all that training your granny's given us,

>I bet we could take on any of them."

>"Shampoo not so certain. Shampoo know she not as tough as Angry Boy.
Every time Shampoo fight, Shampoo get shot. Shampoo no enjoy it.

>Spatula Girl better watch herself."

>Ukyo raised an eyebrow at that. "I'd better watch myself? You're the

one that seems to enjoy making herself a target."
>
"Shampoo glad Sailor Girls like to call name of attack first.
Save
>Shampoo life."

>"That goes double for me. Unlike some people, I haven't benefited
from
the advantages of having the Bakusai Tenketsu training."

>
Grimacing, Shampoo rubbed her arm, trying to smooth away a
large,
>purpling bruise. "Great Grandmother's training hard. Hurt much to
learn.
Many pretty girls... They not pretty after learn Bakusai
Tenketsu."
>
Quiet for a moment, Ukyo studied the flat surface of her battle
spatula,
>wondering how her face would look after so many devastating impacts
by
a large rock. "Well, you're taking a bit of a risk if you ask
me. What
>do you think would happen if you're all messed up afterwards and I'm

still pretty? Sounds to me like Ranchan would be mine for the
taking."
>
Shampoo laughed, bold and hearty. "Shampoo in no danger. First
day
>Shampoo chase Ranma, she say 'This body be yours.' Ranma no care.
Ranma
no look at face. Ranma no look at skin. Ranma look inside.
Shampoo no
>care if she ugly or scarred. Shampoo no care... Because Ranma no
care."

>Silent, Ukyo contemplated what her companion said. There was no
doubt
that Ranma was surrounded by beautiful girls. Herself,
Shampoo, Kodachi,
>Kasumi or even Hinako-sensei. Despite that, he had stood by Akane.
She
might have been pretty - in a tomboyish way - but she was not
as nice
>as her sisters, and Ukyo did not think she would win any contests

against the rest of Ranma's fiancées and suitors.
>
"You could be right... But forgetting about that, how long do
you think
>it will take you to learn the Exploding Point technique?"

>"Shampoo not sure. Angry Boy learn in week. But he spend all time

training. Shampoo must practice other things. Must be faster.
Must be
>stronger. It may be long time before I learn."

>"Wasn't Ranchan learning the Bakusai Tenketsu, too? I could have
sworn
I saw her in some weird setup in the back yard."

>
"Ranma learn in girl form... Maybe... Shampoo think Ranma just
pull up
>boulder then get hit by it."

>Ukyo's mouth dropped open and her eyes bugged out. "What?! Why would
he
be doing that?"
>
"Ranma no care about Exploding Point. Ranma only want tough. Why
he
>need blow things up?"

>"Well, yeah, but..." Ukyo stumbled to a halt. Could that be right?

Ranma was just going through the training, but not really trying to
>learn the Bakusai Tenketsu. It hardly seemed likely, but Shampoo's

explanation made sense. She had only watched her fiancé a couple
of

>times while he undertook the gruelling training, but he definitely made
no move to try and destroy the boulder. Shoulders slumping in defeat,
>Ukyo conceded the point to the Amazon. "You could be right... I would
hate to think of going through all that without learning a new
>technique, but after hearing some of Genma's stories, I guess anything
is possible."
>
Shampoo nodded. She too had heard the elder Saotome's stories of how he
>had trained his son. Whenever Shampoo or Ukyo would slack off in their
training under Genma, he would exhort them on with another anecdote of
>how much harder his son had trained. Flaming pits, ravenous animals,
long marches through arctic wastes; these were all just a sample of the
>sorts of things Genma had done to his son. While neither girl could
dispute the fact that the results spoke for themselves, both had a hard
>time accepting that the end had justified the means used.

>Silent for a time, the girls looked around the yard, taking in the
others that trained there. It was strange in many ways; it was only
>after the Tendo Dojo was destroyed that it really became a centre of
training for martial artists. Without boasting, the girls could proudly
>say that they were a part of what was probably the most highly skilled
group of fighters in all of Japan. There might be other fighters out
>there that could take them on - Ukyo had not heard of them, but they
might exist - however there were certainly no teams as strong as theirs.
>
From where they stood, Ukyo and Shampoo could see Ranma bouncing around
>his father. The boy was doing speed training by taking on both his
father and Ryoga at the same time. While both of the fighters got in
>each other's way, Ranma was obviously learning how he could take on
more than one Senshi at a time. Ryoga did not mind being in the

>embarrassing position too much, that morning he had been the centre of
the training, with everyone taking turns beating on him with the weapon
>of their choice... Sort of an advanced course for Bakusai Tenketsu
users.
>
Ukyo settled her eyes on Kuno for a while. The tall boy was sitting on
>the back porch, a pad of rice paper and a brush beside him. All morning
he had been composing poetry to his new loves, then at lunch he had
>deigned to fight Mousse to give the Chinese boy some training.

Surprisingly enough, although Mousse won, it had not been an easy fight.
>Kuno was still rigidly stuck in the forms of his beloved Kendo, but he
was very, very good at Kendo. Ukyo hated to admit that if she did not
>have a plethora of "dirty tricks" in her repertoire ranging from flour
bombs to exploding flakes, she might lose against him. Fortunately, she

>recognised the value of having more than one way to attack. Now Kuno

was back to his meditating; he said it "raised his awareness of
the
>world, and made him superior in all the ways only a Kuno can
be".

>That accounted for everyone in their troupe of martial artists,
since
Cologne - to the amazement of everyone - was actually
teaching Mousse
>something. She had gruffly mumbled something about making him less
of a
burden on Shampoo and Ranma, but she was definitely helping.
If that
>was the sort of miracle they could come to expect, Ukyo knew they
would
win without fail.
>
A nod from Shampoo in the direction of the house made Ukyo
realise she
>had missed one of their team. While Hotaru was not a martial artist
in
anyone's imagination, she was part of the team. "What Spatula
Girl
>think of Little Girl?"

>Shampoo's question caught Ukyo by surprise, but she answered it
easily
enough. "Heck, Sugar, if it wasn't for Hotaru, I wouldn't
be here now.
>I guess I owe her for that."

>"Shampoo no think Little Girl proper fighter. All defence... Is no
way
to fight. Shampoo think Little Girl should go home. Leave
fighting to
>us."

>"I can't disagree with you on that. Look at her, she's just a kid.
She
shouldn't be involved in stuff like this."
>
"Shampoo think we need more like men like Lost Boy."
>
Ukyo stared at her in shock. "You're saying we need more men? I
thought
>Amazons hated the idea of men being able to fight."

>"If more Amazon here, Shampoo feel happier in battle. Shampoo feel
much
frightened when not fighting. All Amazons want Ranma too too
much. If
>more Ryoga, Shampoo happy in fight, happy out of fight."

>"Sometimes you surprise me, Sugar. I hadn't thought of it that way.
I
guess every girl he runs into falls for him, doesn't she?"

>
Feeling annoyed, Shampoo stayed silent for a while. Just because
she
>could not speak their language well, everyone assumed she was an
idiot.
She was going to be the next Matriarch of the Amazons some
day. She
>knew she had a long way to go until she was as good as Cologne, but
she
was a long way from being as dumb as she felt these Japanese
credited
>her for. "Only girl Ranma notice now is Little Girl. Shampoo wait.
When
Ranma see women again, Shampoo be here for him."

>
Laughing, Ukyo looked at where Hotaru was sitting with Kasumi.
"You
>know, your right. She lives here, she spends most of the day with
him,
and she's about the only person I've seen him pay attention
to. If she
>was a few years older, I'd be worried."

>"Shampoo not worried. Ranma need real woman for wife. Ranma much
older
than Little Girl. Shampoo be here for Ranma. Take him home

to China."

>
"Oh, really?... And you think you're good enough to be able to get him
>past me?" Ukyo hoisted her battle spatula threateningly.

>Grinning to match her opponent, Shampoo raised her own weapons.

"Shampoo show Spatula Girl how good Amazon is."

>
With a crash and a clang, the training resumed, and violence regained

>control where for a few fleeting moments there had been peace. In the
house, the most recent subject of the girl's conversation was having a

>talk of her own.

>Ever since she had been very young, Hotaru had wondered what it would
be like to have a brother or sister. At school, she had always dreamed

>of having a big sister. Someone that would stick up for her in the
playground when the other children picked on her. Someone that she

>could talk to about all the little things that worried her. Someone
that she could share her hopes and dreams with. When she was alone at

>night and the storms were raging, she sometimes dreamed of having a big
brother. He would be brave and strong, always there to protect her when

>she was scared, and always willing to help her when was too sick or
tired to finish walking home.

>
When she met Ranma-san, Hotaru thought that all of her dreams had come

>true at once. Ranma-san seemed to be everything she had always hoped
for. He was kind and caring, but at the same time he could be strong

>and brave. To here, Ranma was a bright knight and a shining princess
all in one.

>
No matter how great Ranma-san was, Hotaru would not give up her big

>sister Kasumi. Ranma-san might have been the big sister that would take
care of her in the playground at school, but Kasumi was the sister she

>would turn to when she was sad and lonely. Somehow, Kasumi-nee-chan
seemed to always know the right answers. She always had a pot of fresh

>warm tea or a warm set of arms perfect for hugging, just when you
needed it.

>
Right now, Hotaru needed a hug. It was over a week since she had seen

>her father, and watching Ranma-san jump around and laugh at her father
made the little girl feel the loss even more. Maybe that was why she

>liked Kasumi so much, Hotaru thought. She was more than just a big
sister, she was like the mother she had never known too.

>
Kasumi had found her sitting in the living room, watching Ranma battle

>her father while silent tears fell down her face. Instinctively known
that this pain was something more than just the scrapes and bruises her

>guests seemed to attract, Kasumi had settled down next to the small
girl and placed an arm around her shoulders. Before Kasumi knew what

>was happening, Hotaru was leaning against her, crying her eyes out.

>When the girl finally stopped crying enough so that Kasumi could be

heard, she pulled out a tissue and wiped Hotaru's face. "What's
the
>matter, Hotaru-chan?"

>She sniffled, but did not start crying again. "I miss my Daddy."

>"Oh, dear. I know it must be hard."

>"Do you really, Kasumi-nee-chan? Last night, when we went out,
Ranma-san
took us near when I used to live... Da--- He had made
our home again,
>just like it used to be. I looked at it, and I thought it had all
been
just some horrible dream. I kept hoping that I could walk in
there and
>Daddy would be all right, and he could take me home again..."

>"But it wasn't?... " It was half a question, half a statement. Kasumi

knew that if everything truly was all right, she would not be
nursing
>the girl now.

>"It looked the same on the outside, but I could still feel the evil
all
through it. The house was just the same as Daddy last time I
saw him.
>On the outside, it was all friendly and warm and loving, but
inside..."
Hotaru sniffled again and looked up at the brown
haired girl who was
>gently brushing her own black tresses.

>"When I was a little girl," Kasumi began. "Just a little younger
than
you are now, my Mummy got very, very sick. Akane-chan and
Nabiki were
>even younger, and they did not understand what was happening. So I
was
the one that had to start looking after things around here.
I'd cook,
>and I'd clean, and every day after school I would go and visit my

mother in the hospital."
>
For a moment, Kasumi looked into the distance, remembering how
her
>mother looked. Her skin was as pale as the white sheets she lay in,
and
towards the end she seemed to have more tubes and wires going
into her
>than there was space for them on her arms.

>"Every day, she would get just a little sicker. It's not the same as

your Daddy, but when our mother lay there, I felt so bad because
there
>was nothing I could do. I could look after the house, and I could
make
sure my sisters were healthy, but I couldn't do anything for
my mother.
>I loved my mother just as much as you love your Daddy, Hotaru-chan.
You
just have to remember that even if someone you love is sick,
sometimes
>the best thing you can do for them is try and be well yourself."

>"R-Really?"

>Kasumi smiled. "Of course. If your Daddy could talk to you, do you

think he would rather you were at home now, getting sick or
attacked by
>whatever attacked him; or do you think he would want you here? Safe
and
sound with Ranma-kun, Nabiki-chan and all of us together?"

>
"He... He'd want me to be here..."
>
"See? I've never met him, but I'm sure your Daddy must be a very
>special person to bring up a little girl like you by himself. I'm
sure
he would be very sad to see you crying now."
>
"But... But I've got all these powers, and I can't even help
him..."
>
Kasumi was quiet for a moment. "Do you see Ranma-kun out there?
Do you
>think he is good enough to fight off all those nasty people that
hurt
your Daddy?"
>
"No... Not yet, but I know he will be!" Hotaru's faith was
unswerving
>and unshakable.

>"So... Why do you think you need to be able to do everything right
now?
You have a very precious gift, Hotaru-chan. I don't mean
being a
>magical girl, I mean being able to heal someone. Oh... The number of

times I wish I could have been able to heal Akane-chan just like
you
>healed Ranma-kun. You never met my little sister, but she was always

getting scrapes and bruises. If it was not one thing, it was
another...
>See how Ranma-kun is training? Well, he promised to help you train
too,
didn't he? Ranma-kun always keeps his promises, he's a very
good boy
>like that. I'm sure he'll help you get stronger too."

>"You mean I might be able to..."

>Giving the girl another strong hug, Kasumi spoke softly. "I can't

promise, Firefly. I wish I could. I wish I could bring my mother
back,
>but I can't do that either. All I can say is you have some very good

friends here, who like you very much. If you all work together,
I'm
>sure you can save your Daddy."

>Muffled from where she was holding the bigger girl, Hotaru's voice
came
out quietly. Quiet, but strong, filled with renewed hope,
and a
>determination that had been all but lost recently. "Thank you,
Kasumi-
neechan. Thank you so much. I... I always wondered what it
would be
>like to have a mother or a big sister, and now... And now I know.
Thank
you, Kasumi-neechan."
>
Looking down at the straight, dark black hair, Kasumi briefly
closed
>her eyes and remembered a time in the past when she had cradled
Akane
in exactly the same manner, explaining why they would no
longer go to
>the hospital to visit their mother. Sometimes a good cry and a talk

helped; even if you were trying to be the strong one. "You're
welcome,
>Hotaru-chan. You're welcome."

>* * *

>It was getting chilly at ten o'clock at night when Ranma and Hotaru

were finishing their patrol with Ukyo. By general agreement,
Shampoo
>and Ukyo traded nights for patrol with Ranma, the other one going
out
with Ryoga to keep him on track. Mousse and Kuno went out
patrolling
>together, despite their protests.

>One thing the boys did not deny was that they had an edge on the girls.
Kuno might not be able to beat the Senshi or a demon, but he had
>demonstrated more than once in the last week that he could mysteriously
be saved by the fortuitous actions of a well hidden Kuno family ninja.
>Between Mousse's weapons and Kuno's capacity for distraction, they were
more than capable of delaying any foe long enough to effect some sort
>of rescue.

>They might not win, but they seemed an oddly capable team when it came
obstruction. That did not mean they had to like it. Mousse would rather
>have been with Shampoo than Kuno, and Kuno resented the way that Mousse
impinged the character of the two girls that he loved. Although he did
>not tell his partner, Kuno silently vowed that he would save his lady-
loves and prove to the world that they had been enslaved by the foul
>sorcerer going by the name of Tuxedo Kamen.

>With the martial artists split into smaller teams, they did not force
battle with their enemies, but instead simply sought to distract their
>foes until their victims escaped or one of the other groups in the
grand melee arrived. It was funny in many ways, watching two sets of
>dire enemies slugging it out while you could sit back and watch.

>A little earlier Ranma, Ukyo and Hotaru had been fortunate enough to
save an up-and-coming piano star from death. From Nabiki's intelligence
>gathering that went on undaunted day and night, they could identify the
attacker as Witch Mimete, one of the Death Busters. So far Nabiki's
>sources had failed to turn up anything resembling an explanation as to
what the Death Buster was after, other than the fact that it required
>pulling some sort of shinny star from a person's chest, and that lead
to their death.
>
They had arrived just in time to see Mimete shoot the person and summon
>forth a Daimon. Acting without concern for their own lives, Ranma and
Ukyo had charged the attackers with Hotaru close behind, though rapidly
>losing distance. Without trying to seriously attack her, Ranma closed
in on the Witch, and Ukyo had struggled to grab the star-thing before
>the Daimon got it.

>Distracted by Ranma, Mimete had been unable to stop Ukyo from returning
the star to its rightful owner. Things would have gotten very messy
>then, since there was no way that the three of them could defeat the
Witch and her Daimon by themselves. In previous battles, Ranma had seen
>the entire team of five Senshi defeated by that same Witch, so she was
well and truly happy when the distraction she coveted appeared.
>
Since Ukyo was an easy target - being crouched over a motionless body -
>it made sense for the Outer Senshi to attack her first. The Daimon

was
too resilient to be put down by a single volley of their attack, but
>Neptune and Uranus knew that an ordinary human - or even extraordinary
ones like Ukyo and Ranma - would be doomed from the Deep Submerge and
>World Shaking. Such would have been the truth had the golden and aqua
magic reached the girl, but Hotaru's defence proved timely and
>impenetrable.

>As Ukyo grabbed the unconscious piano player and Ranma turned to run,
tucking Hotaru under one arm like a bag of rice, Mimete spied the
>Senshi, and set her sights on extracting a pound of flesh from a more
worthy target.
>
The net result was that they had saved an innocent man with no real
>harm to themselves. They had also been privileged to watch a fast and
furious battle, that ended up disintegrating into a mutual withdrawal
>with no real winners. The Outer Senshi may have defeated the Daimon,
but there seemed to be no end to those around.
>
One the way back home, Hotaru sat on Ukyo's shoulders, getting a piggy
>back. She was tired from all of the exertion of running around, even if
she was in her magical girl, powered-up form at the moment. Resting her
>head on one shoulder, Hotaru looked sideways and watched the confident
way Ranma strode along the street. The redhead was not much taller than
>Hotaru, but she had an air of confidence and ability that Hotaru knew
she would never come close to emulating.
>
Letting her mind wander with the relaxing bounce of Ukyo's walk, Hotaru
>thought how lucky Ranma-san was. Although she had heard some Ukyo-san,
Shampoo-san, Ryoga-san... Well, although she had heard everyone aside
>from Kasumi-neechan saying nasty things about Ranma-san's father, she
still thought he was lucky to be able to live with his father.
>
Not only that, but Ranma-san's mother was also still alive. In that, he
>seemed fairly unique of all of their friends. In a flash, Hotaru's eyes
went open and she remembered several things all at once. Not long ago,
>Ranma-san had told them all that he had not seen his mother since he
was six years old. Just as importantly, she could remember Kasumi-
>neechan holding her, and saying how much she wished she could bring her
mother back.
>
Deep down, Hotaru knew that although Ranma-san was bravely working
>through this horrible and difficult quest, he must really want to see
his mother. Now, while Ranma-san could not spare any time to go and
>look for her since he was so busy training so he could defeat all of
the evil in Tokyo, there was no reason that a friend of Ranma could not
>go looking for his mother on his behalf.

>A small smile settled on Hotaru's weary face as she thought of how
right it was. He was working every day to become stronger so that

he

>could help her father and get rid of the evil. If he was doing so much
for her, she should do this for him. Silently Hotaru swore to herself:

>she would find his mother and bring Ranma-san's family back together.

>* * *

>Kaiou Michiru appeared on the street as the elegant Sailor Neptune
released her powers and returned to her mundane state. Around her,

>shops lay in ruins, and a broken water main spouted into the air. From
the distance came sirens, but she knew that she and her companion would

>have time to leave the vicinity before they were identified.

>"It's OK now, Haruka. You can change back now."

>The tall Senshi in the dark blue gave a slight nod, the only sign that
she had heard. "Death Busters again."

>
Michiru nodded and began to pick her way through the rubble. The fight

>had been long and violent, but they had won. As Sailor Uranus always
told her, that was the main thing. Stepping over some brick shards that

>wobbled dangerously under her feet, Michiru wondered if her partner had
the right idea by staying a Senshi for a while longer. While Sailor

>Uranus' boots had heels, she had less trouble stalking through the
rubble than Michiru, and the green haired girl was wearing sneakers.

>
Waiting on the other side of the devastation, Sailor Uranus looked back

>at where she had fought without any sign of distress. Michiru knew that
whenever she looked at the damage they did, she felt a terrible mixture

>of fear and revulsion. She knew what they were doing was right, but it
did not help to see her efforts branded as "over-enthusiastic

>vigilantism" on the evening news.

>One of the keys that kept Michiru sane and going in the battle was the
constant strength and determination of her bigger friend. While they

>had both inherited powers beyond comprehension when they became Senshi,
Haruka had gained something more. Somehow, across time, the soul of the

>dead Senshi had travelled with the powers. This imbued Sailor Uranus
with a fire, a drive, a constant determination to do what needed to be

>done. It filled the blonde with a recognition of destiny and an ability
to tell right from wrong with such certitude that Michiru found herself

>following, even when she was Sailor Neptune.

>"Daimons again. They're the worse enemy."

>Catching up with her friend, Michiru walked along beside her.

"Well...
They're certainly strong. I don't know if I would say they are the

>worse. Black Lady or the Inner Senshi might be stronger."

>Uranus was cold and calculating. It was better to win battles if you
lived that way. "Black Lady, yes, although the rest of the Dark Moon

>Family are not much of a concern. The Inners... No. Despite their

sudden interest in team work, they present no real threat to us."

>
"But still, if Sailor Moon is the Moon Princess---"

>
"No!" Uranus cut her off with a sweep of her hand. "There is no
more

>princess, remember that. Everything we fought for, everything we
died
for, is gone. Always remember that. Whoever this Sailor Moon
is, she is

>not the Princess. She does not have her power, and she does not act

like the Princess of the Moon Kingdom. When I lived before, I
served

>someone wise, someone greater than us all. I refuse to bow down
before
a mindless child that consorts with our enemies."

>
"You're right. I just..."

>
Stopping part way down an alley, Sailor Uranus turned and looked
at her

>friend. Tall already, in heels she topped Michiru neatly, even
though
the girl was not short herself by any means. Placing a
hand on either

>of Michiru's shoulders, Sailor Uranus looked down into her eyes.

>"We all want thing to be the way they were. I'm sure that even
Sailor
Pluto and Sailor Saturn want them back to normal. Pluto
might still be

>in a coma, and Saturn may prefer a 'death and rebirth' philosophy,
but
we all want the same thing. Just wishing it was so does not
make it

>happen, however. To bring about this new future requires effort,

determination and sacrifice. Always sacrifice."

>
For a moment, sadness seemed to cross the blonde's eyes, but it
was

>banished by the rock hard control that Sailor Uranus routinely

maintained. Continuing on as though she had never been caught by
her

>own words, Uranus turned and continued walking. She might love
Sailor
Neptune / Michiru more than life itself, but as Sailor
Uranus, she knew

>she needed to put the system first, to put duty before love or
honour.

>Walking quickly to keep up, Michiru looked up at the stern visage

beside her. "Have you had any thoughts why the Death Busters are
trying

>to collect Heart Crystals?"

>"No... Unless they know about the Talismans."

>"The Talismans?..."

>Uranus' eyes flicked to the side briefly to see if Michiru
understood,
or if she was confused. This was not uncommon for
them, and it was one

>of the reasons why they made such a good team. While they both

acknowledged that the reawakening that had occurred had been
wonderful,

>it had been sadly lacking in thoroughness. So often, Michiru could

remember something from the Moon Kingdom that Haruka could not,
or vice

>versa.

>"The Talismans were items of great powers, weapons for the Outer
Senshi.
Sailor Saturn had her Silence Glaive which she would not
part with, but

>the remainder of us had other powerful items, known as the
Talismans.
The Garnet Rod, the Space Sword and the Deep Aqua
Mirror. These three
>items were there to bolster our strength in battle, making us even
more
feared by those who would harm our beloved Kingdom.

>
"According the Royal Command, the three Talismans were to be
stored in

>the Heart Crystals of those pure enough to hold them. This would
ensure
that the weapons did not fall into the hands of our
enemies, nor could

>they be found or stolen easily."

>They were near the end of the alley now, Haruka's car only a short

distance away across the road. "What are the chances of our
finding

>them?"

>Uranus smiled coldly. "Excellent. Other than the energy value of the

Heart Crystals, I cannot think why the Death Busters would be
after

>them, unless they knew about the Talismans. So long as we always
arrive
at the battle first and never let our determination stray,
we shall be

>victorious."

>Sailor Uranus took a step forward out of the alley's shadows and she

suddenly felt Michiru's hand restraining her. "I thing it would
be best

>if you transformed. People might begin to wonder if they saw the

magnificent Sailor Uranus driving Tenou Haruka's car."

>
Uranus opened her mouth to object, then closed it again. Michiru
was

>right, and this was not an argument she could win. Taking a few more

steps back into the alley, Sailor Uranus took a deep breath, then

>released her magic, transforming back into an ordinary school
girl.

>As the glow of the magic faded, Haruka fell to her knees, one hand

against the cold hard brick of the building, the other barely
managing

>to keep her face for lying on the ground. Shaking and quaking, she

began heaving violently. One after another, scenes from their
recent

>fight barraged her mind. The violence, the destruction, and worst of

all; the blood. No longer able to retain her control, Haruka lost

>mastery of her stomach, and the contents returned to lie under her
as
she threw up again and again.

>
Kneeling there in the cold and the dark, Haruka could not feel
the

>reassuring presence of her friend. All she could understand was the

horrific images of what had just occurred. Pain, misery and loss,
all

>for a war that the average Tokyo resident did not even know existed.

All for a war in which she was a key author of the pain. Wracked
by a

>guilt and anguish so strong it was physical, Haruka let out a low

keening sound and rolled sideways, panting desperately.

>
When she had fought the Daimon and its mistress, the battle had
only

>lasted minutes. While the after-battle shock really only lasted a

similar time, the effect was much more draining. When Haruka
regained
>her senses, she found she was still lying in the alley, but now her

head was resting on Michiru's leg while her girlfriend brushed
the
>blonde hair from her forehead. Steadying her breathing, Haruka

shuddered once more and looked up to meet the concerned eyes of
her
>impromptu nurse.

>Michiru sounded concerned, naturally enough. "Are you all right?
What
was that?"
>
Spitting to remove some of the horrible taste from her mouth,
Haruka
>looked away. "Just... Shock or something... I think. I've noticed it

happening more often these days. Once I change back from Sailor
Uranus
>I no longer... I mean I can remember what happened and... I
just..."

>"Shhh... Hey, it's OK." Continuing to sooth her friend, Michiru was

more worried than ever. By the sounds of it, this was not the
first
>time that Haruka had felt this way, but she had not told her before.

Reflecting, it was only after a foray that they did not end up
fighting
>that Haruka was still with her when they transformed. Normally the

blonde would dash off, meeting up again an hour or so later, once
she
>had a chance to freshen up.

>Michiru could understand Haruka's distress; she felt upset whenever

they had to hurt someone to save the world. The level of Haruka's

>distress, that was something else all together. It was almost as if

everything Sailor Uranus experienced, she bottled up and put it
aside,
>waiting until some time after the battle for it to affect her. As
soon
as the Sailor transformed, that masterful control was lost,
and Tenou
>Haruka - ordinary schoolgirl - was subject to the full force of
emotion
and horror that would make a seasoned warrior cringe and
cower.
>
Helping her friend into the car, Michiru took they keys with
only a
>token protest from the ex-racer. Normally Haruka would refuse to be
in
the car if someone else was driving, but currently she was in
no state
>to protest. Her hands shook, and her face was cold and clammy. As
the
car moved off, Michiru waited in silence, a willing ear for
her
>friend's problems.

>"W-When I'm Sailor Uranus, it's like everything is so clear. I can

understand what needs to be done, and I can do it. It's... It's
easy.
>Everything's black and white. Good, bad. Us, them. But when that
leaves
me... Oh, Michiru, I don't know how you do it. It's bad
enough going
>through it after the battle, but how do you manage to fight when

everything is beating down on you like that."
>
"I rely on my partner. She helps me get through." There was not

>recrimination in her voice, but there did not need to be. Haruka knew
she should not have tried to keep this from Michiru. They were partners,
>lovers and more. The key to any good relationship was communications,
and her suffering in silence was the worst sort of action. It hurt her,
>and that in turn hurt the woman she loved.

>"I'm sorry. I didn't want you to think less of me. I wanted to be a
real soldier. I know how you look up to Uranus - even I do. I just
>didn't want to seem any less in your eyes."

>"Oh, Haruka. I would never think badly of you, no matter what
happened."
>
The remaining drive back to Michiru's home was done in silence, and by
>the time Haruka stepped out of the car, her earlier distress could
hardly be seen. Walking into the house, Michiru took her friend's hand
>and looked at her green eyes. "Now... Is there anything else you need
to tell me?"
>
"No... Not really. Sometimes I have a bit of trouble getting to sleep
>at night, but that's all."

>Placing an arm around Haruka's waist, Michiru pulled her in the
direction of the guest's room. "How about we check on our visitor, then
>I'll give you a massage. Maybe you're just working too hard and you
need to help relax."
>
"Yeah, maybe." Haruka did not sound convinced, but she allowed Michiru
>to lead the way. The real reason she could not get to sleep was the way
she kept remembering the faces of all the people that had been hurt or
>killed at her hands. While she was Sailor Uranus, she had no problem,
since she knew the end justified the means they were using. However,
>that was cold comfort while she was alone in her bed, only her guilty
conscience to keep her company.
>
The "visitor" in the guest room lay there as quiet and still as the day
>she had arrived. Long dark green hair spilled out over the pillow and
across the fine sheets, bracketing the well tanned features of the
>Guardian Of Time. In another example of the way their splintered
memories worked, it had been Michiru that had remembered why Sailor
>Pluto had such a good tan. While she had been a rather pale girl when
she first took the mantle of Sailor Pluto, constant exposure to the
>radiations in the Time Stream had tanned her through even the Sailor
suit's magical protection.
>
Delicate pink lipstick, red shield-shaped earrings and a black, sailor
>style collar were all that could be seen of the woman to reveal her
magical heritage. Even her tiara was covered by the fringe of her
>lustrous hair. Sailor Pluto's breathing was slow but deep and regular,
much like a normal person sleeping. But while she might be sleeping, to
>date nothing had been able to awaken her.

>Every day Michiru and Haruka would share the duties of cleaning and

taking care of her. She did not need to bathe, as the Sailor suit kept
>her in pristine condition, but they took no chances. Since they
could
not remove the white bodysuit, they cleaned what they
could, and combed
>her long hair. Several times a day they would feed her a simple
liquid
diet high in protein and energy. While the Senshi would
drink what
>passed her lips, she showed no other signs of noticing the care that

was being taken.
>
Their patient's failure to respond had no effect on the two
girls
>tending her. They would look after her as long as they lived, and if
she
survived them - which seemed likely during some battles -
they had left
>detailed instructions for her care. Their loyalty to the comatose

Senshi did not just stem from a sense of solidarity. Instead,
they
>remembered the closeness the three Outers had once shared, and held
a
hope that one day it may return. In the meanwhile, they would
care for
>Sailor Pluto at home and defend the virtues and future they held
dear
while outside.
>
Though their hope was unfailing, they could not help but feel a

>constant slight despair. When would Sailor Pluto reawaken?

>* * *

>Tap. Tap.

>Tap. Tap. Tap.

>"Hey! Hotaru! Wake up!"

>"Wha?..." Slowly, with tired eyes, Tomoe Hotaru sat up on her futon
and
tried to understand where the noise was coming from. Looking
around the
>room, she could not see anyone. At the moment, she was sharing a
room
with her new sister, Kasumi. For a while, she had been using
the
>Tendo's guest room, but when she had found out that meant Ranma-san
and
his father were sleeping in the dojo, she had asked Kasumi if
she could
>move in with her. Naturally the eldest Tendo was delighted, and
Ranma
had once more gained the use of his room.
>
Normally Kasumi was an early riser, something that Hotaru was
not able
>to match, especially with the late nights she often had these days.
Out
of consideration to her roommate, Kasumi would leave the
blinds down,
>dress and then go and start her day, all without waking the small
form
sleeping on the futon near her bed. Kasumi had offered to
share the bed,
>since she knew the small girl was lonely and scared, but Hotaru did
not
want to impose any more than she needed to.
>
Now she was awake - at least slightly - and the tapping sound
was still
>coming. Turning her head, Hotaru looked at the door and blinked.

Normally when someone knocks, the sound comes from the door, but
she
>could swear that...

>Throwing aside her sheets, Hotaru walked to the window and pulled
aside
the blind. Blinking slightly at the bright morning

sunshine, Hotaru
>recoiled slightly. Grinning at her through the closed window was Ranma.
He was hanging upside-down, and looked entirely too sprightly for this
>time of the day.

>"Good morning, Hotaru. Time to get dressed and get ready."

>Hotaru blinked a few more times. "Ano... Get ready for what?"

>"Training! Yep. Today, I'm going to start training you. Can't have you
being the only one left out, can I?"
>
Amazed, Hotaru gaped several times, then let the blinds fall shut again.
>Safe in the darkness, Hotaru doffed her nightshirt and began hunting
around for clothes. "I'll be right down, Ranma-san!"

>
Pulling on her school dress, Hotaru could hardly believe it. Ranma-san
>had said he would train her, and now he was really going to! She just
knew in her heart that any day now she would be as good as Ukyo-san or
>Shampoo-san. They would all go into fight the evil Witches or the Dark
Moon Family together. Side by side, her and all of the other pretty
>girl soldiers in Ranma-san's team.

>Bursting with excitement, Hotaru dashed into the hallway, her socks
slipping slightly on the smooth wood floor. Bouncing down the stairs,
>she looked this way and that, before seeing Ranma sitting at the dining
table. His arms were crossed, and he wore a very serious expression on
>his face.

>"Good morning, Hotaru. Today I shall start to teach you the first
precepts of being a martial artist."
>
Trying not to show her excitement, Hotaru gave a bow. "Hai, Sensei."
>
"First thing... Sit down... Good... Now, Kasumi, could you please bring
>in the first item?"

>Kasumi, who had obviously been waiting in the kitchen came in with a
covered tray, which she set down on the table between them. Giving a
>quick smile to Ranma and a reassuring nod to Hotaru, she again withdrew
to the kitchen.
>
"My father, although he is a fat, inconsiderate slob, is also a real
>good teacher of martial arts, Hotaru. Since he taught me what's
important, now I'm gunna teach you. Are you ready for your first

>lesson?"

>The small girl gave a nervous nod. She had seen the sort of training
that Ranma, his father, and his friends did. Although she knew she
>could transform into her magical girl form, she did not know if she
could keep up with that sort of work.
>
"Right." With a flourish, Ranma lifted the lid on the tray, revealing a
>tray full of Kasumi's finest cooking. A hearty Japanese breakfast, it
had eggs and some meat for protein, rice for energy, and vegetables

>for... Well, vegetables were supposed to be good for you somehow, so it
had some of them too. "Your first task, is to eat this. Pops always taught me that you can't fight on an empty stomach. So... Before we do
anything else, you gotta eat all this."

>
The meal was not large, but it was more than she was used to eating.

>"Are... Are you serious, Ranma-san? I thought you were going to train
me?"

>
"I am!" Ranma almost sounded hurt. "Pops taught me to eat everything I could get by stealing anything I had. I kinda figured I'd try something
a bit easier, you know, you being older than I was and all. So, come on, eat up. Body's gotta have fuel if it's gunna grow."

>"Yes." She said quietly and began to eat. Hotaru started to feel full
around half way through, but under Ranma's watchful gaze she persisted.

>Pointing out that green things and rice were supposed to be good for
your skin, Ranma urged Hotaru to finish the meal in the hopes she would begin to regain the colour and vitality that she was still lacking.

>With the meal done, they took the dishes into the kitchen. Hotaru
wanted to help clean them, but Kasumi shooed her out, saying that everything was taken care of. Following Ranma, they put their shoes on,
then proceeded out of the house and grounds. They were halfway down the block when Hotaru looked up and finally asked. "Ranma-san, where are we
going?"

>
"That way."

>
She peered down the street. "I don't see anything... Are we going somewhere special? Why don't we train with the others?"

>Sighing slightly, Ranma stopped and faced the small girl. In his boy
form he was substantially taller, and looked strong and resilient, just like Hotaru had always imagined heroes to look. "All right, Hotaru. Do
you wanna be able to do this?"

>
With that, Ranma jumped into the air and performed one of his flashier katas. Arms and legs slashed, swept and struck imaginary opponents,
while he seemed to hover in the air longer than any person bound by Newtonian physics had any right to. Touching down, he looked to her for
an answer.

>
Eyes shimmering with hope Hotaru nodded. If that was what he was going to teach her today, she could not wait. With her ability to fly, she
could stay up even longer than he could!

>
"Right. But to do that, you gotta know the basics. More than that, you gotta be in great shape. Them guys... They might call this hard
training, but not one of them - not even Akane would've - none of them would train for less than two or three hours a day normally."

>Kneeling down, Ranma looked her right in the eye. "That's what it

takes
to be this good, Hotaru. You gotta live the art. And you gotta live it
>all your life. Now I ain't saying you can't be a martial artist. All

I'm saying is you've gotta start at the beginning. Right?"

>
Saddened slightly, Hotaru nodded. Perhaps she was being foolish

>thinking she would be able to fight along side her idol. "Yes, Ranma-
san."

>
"Good, 'cause once you got the basics right, then we can start you on

>some more stuff. Time and effort, that's all it takes. If you've got
the guts and the determination, the rest comes naturally. So...

Do you

>reckon you're up to it, or should we head back now?"

>She knew this was the point. Ranma-san would not force her to train if
she did not want to. He would not force her to do anything.

But... But

>if she told him she was scared. If she told him she was worried she
would fail at this like every other time she had done sport at school,

>he would take her back, and that would be the end of it. To Ranma-san,
she would still be a magical girl, but that would be all. She knew how

>much he loved martial arts, and she had seen his respect for the others.
If she said yes, if she kept trying, then she knew that with Ranma-

>san's help, someday she would have his respect too.

>"Let's keep going."

>"Good girl."

>Ranma led off again, but they only covered another hundred meters
before Hotaru found herself asking again. "Um... Where are we going? I

>don't think you said."

>"That way."

>"But _where_ that way? Where are we going?"

>Ranma scratched his head for a bit. "I ain't real sure how to say this,
so gimme a second to think... All right, here's your next lesson: it

>ain't where you're goin', it's how you get there."

>"How I get there? I don't understand."

>Ranma's brows knotted together as he tried to put in words what his
father had taught him. Most of his father's lessons were by example,

>and usually they were an example of what not to do. "All right...

Say
you're a gymnast. Now, would it be better to win first place, if you

>had to go around and hurt everyone before the match. Or would it be
better if you got second, but did it honest."

>
"Second." There was no hesitation at all.

>
"Right. That's what I mean. Same with saving Tokyo. Them Senshi go

>around hurting people, but they say they're saving Tokyo. We go round
helping people, and we say the same thing. You see the difference?"

>
"Yes."

>
"Good. So... Do you understand where we're goin' now?"

>
Hotaru shook her head. "Not at all."

>
Ranma sighed and hung his head. "We're just going for a walk,

OK?

>Walking's about all you can do now, so we'll walk until you have to

stop. And we're gunna do it every day, until you can start to run
for a

>while. You see what I'm getting at? We're going to make you a
martial
artist. Well, to get there, we gotta get you fit.

Everything make sense

>now?"

>"Yes." Unfortunately she had missed most of the message after he
said
that it was just the two of them going for a walk. Roses
seemed to

>sprout up around Ranma's handsome visage, and she could hear gentle

music playing in the background. Sighing, Hotaru felt like she
could

>walk forever, so long as Ranma-san was with her. For once, the
thumping
of her heart had nothing to do with the exercise.

>
Working on the principle that it is easier to exert yourself
when you

>are distracted, Ranma tried an alternative to one of his father's

training techniques. Rather than him running through a forest
chased by

>a pack of wild, hungry dogs, Ranma had a slight improvement planned.

After walking to a nearby subway station, they took a trip to
another

>part of the city. The whole idea was that by walking around
unfamiliar
stores, it would help distract Hotaru and let her keep
going longer

>than she expected.

>As an idea it worked quiet well. Hotaru walked around the shops with

him for over an hour before suddenly becoming more pale and
needing to

>sit down. Rather than undo all of their hard work building her
strength
by eating junk food, Ranma got them a pair of yakitori
each. Once they

>were finished with the food, Ranma juggled the skewers for a while,

simply showing off.

>
Almost literally, a light went off over Ranma's head, and he
turned

>around searching for something. After a moment, he turned back to

Hotaru and beckoned her towards the shop they were in front of.

"Hand-

>eye coordination, Hotaru. You've always gotta remember how important

that is to a martial artist. Just keep in mind what my Pop told
me: 'A

>martial artist is always in complete control of their body.' And
this
looks like just the right place to start developing that
coordination."

>
Dubiously, Hotaru looked up at the large neon sign. 'Crown
Arcade'. Did

>martial artists really train by playing video games? According to
Ranma,
they did. As he had explained on the walk, everything was
training, if

>you looked at it in the right manner. Most people looked for the

easiest way to do things. A real martial artist would look for
the

>hardest, and do it that way just for the training advantage. Of
course,
to Hotaru's delight, Ranma had demonstrated this by
walking along a

>fence with her on his back.

>Entering the arcade, Hotaru let her eyes adjust before following Ranma
up to the back. Of course he would not chose any of the normal games
>for his training. The one he was standing in front of had a large

padded mallet, and lots of little gophers that would pop out of the
>ground. The whole idea of the exercise was to be able to hit them and
get enough points to keep the game going.
>
Taking the first game, Ranma demonstrated how it was supposed to be
>done. The fact that he normally fought bare handed did not seem to

phase him when he worked with a weapon. Nor did the fact that he

>normally faced her and directed an ongoing commentary on how to play.
One after another, all the gophers were struck. Even on the higher
>levels, where several came out of the game at the same time, he would
still strike them all. Then, in the middle of a record beating game he
>stopped and let his credit expire.
>"Here you go. Don't want you to have to start off on the tricky stuff."
He might have said tricky, but it looked very easy for him.
>
Stepping up to the game, Hotaru hesitantly held the mallet and struck
>the first gopher. She got that one, but while she was recovering, the
next one popped up then dropped down again, a point lost for her.
>Gripping the mallet tighter, she resolved to keep trying.

>Needless to say, the game defeated her long before she reached anywhere
near Ranma's level. Despite that, Ranma offered her a few tips on how
>to hold the weapon, and how to stand so that she could react easier.

Slipping another hundred yen piece into the machine, she started again,
>a smile creeping across her face. She might not be much good, but with
Ranma-san as a teacher, learning was sure to be fun.

>
Near the door of the arcade, a slight disturbance was occurring.

>Fortunately, it was sufficiently small not to bother the customers. In
fact, it was the desire not to disturb the customers that caused the

>staff member on duty to try and bar access to one of the arcade's most
notorious visitors.

>
"I'm sorry, Kino-san. You can't come in here."

>
"What? But Matoki-san..."

>
Matoki crossed his arms and stood up to the girl. He had seen Kino

>fight last time she was here, and he knew that he was in trouble if she
wanted to make an issue of it like she had last time she visited. He

>was not on duty at the time, but the report from the boy she had
hospitalised said enough. As far as Crown Arcade was concerned, Kino

>Makoto was persona non-gratis. He might be a boy and slightly taller

than the brown haired girl, but he did not care to take her on.

>
Looking through the window to the store while the Kino girl

fidgeted,
>he spotted Tsukino Usagi. Nothing like Kino Makoto, this girl was
one
of his regular visitors. If he was really lucky, she would
have her
>boyfriend with her. Usagi-chan might be too small to fight, but he
had
seen Chiba-san taking on some drunks outside before, and he
was nothing
>to sneeze at.

>"Look, come on, Matoki-san. I'm supposed to meet some friends
here..."

>"Friends of yours are not the sort of people I want to meet,
Kino-san.
Now, please leave."
>
Surprisingly enough, the young thug looked like she was about to
leave.
>Then, to Matoki's everlasting surprise, Usagi came through the door
and
pulled Kino's head down for a quick, quiet conversation. "Did
you
>forget, Mako-chan? Ami-chan said this was one of the things that had

changed by Prince Diamond coming back in time. I don't know what

>happened here, but Matoki-san doesn't like you anymore."

>Nodding her head in sadness, Makoto agreed. She remembered what Ami
had
said, but she did not really believe it. In the time that
they had come
>from, Matoki was a good friend of theirs. Before Usagi had started

going out with Mamoru, both of the girls had shared a serious
crush on
>the tall, good looking boy that worked in the Crown Arcade. Needless
to
say, both of them had been heartbroken when they found out he
had a
>kind, beautiful fiancée. Despite getting over their crush, they had
all
remained good friends.
>
Even though she had never known Ami to be wrong, Makoto had
hoped she
>had been mistaken about what she had heard about Makoto's
reputation.
Always a fighter, in this timeline, she had not had
Usagi's friendship
>to temper that edge. That, combined with fighting the Dark Kingdom,
had
left her more bitter and violent than she had ever been. This
in turn
>had gotten her thrown out of school, various restaurants, and also
the
Crown Arcade.
>
Patting her tall friend's hand, Usagi boldly walked forwards and
smiled
>up at Matoki. While her flame only burned for Mamoru these days, she

could still smile sweetly and charm boys when she needed to... So
long
>as she did not trip over something in the meantime and make a fool
of
herself.
>
"Matoki-san. Could you let Mako-chan in... For me?"

>
Matoki worked his mouth several times before any words came out,
and
>even then, it sounded like he could not believe the words he was

uttering. "_You're_ the friend she was going to meet?"

>
"Nnn. And Ami-chan and Mina-chan too. Rei-chan is busy at the
temple
>today."

>"No way! I don't believe it!" Matoki made warding gestures with his

hands. "There is no way Mizuno Ami would ever be in the same room
as
>Kino Makoto! Those two hate each other!"

>As though summoned by his name, a blue haired girl entered the
Arcade,
walking side by side with a bright, cheery blonde. "Hi,
Mako-chan. How
>was your day?"

>"Fine, Ami-chan. But I think we might have to find somewhere else to

go." Gesturing with her head, Makoto indicated where Usagi was
talking
>to Matoki.

>"Don't worry, Mako-chan. I'm sure Usagi-chan can make him
understand.
We're all friends now."
>
"Yeah." The tall girl's eyes shimmered slightly. She had never
had any
>real friends until she joined the Senshi. The prospect of her having

lost them in this timeline had disturbed her badly.
>
Back where the significantly shaken Matoki was talking with
Usagi, the
>boy was trying to pull himself together. While he had not heard with

the girls had said, there was no doubt that Mizuno Ami and Kino
Makoto
>had just managed to have a civil conversation. Even more astounding,
it
looked like Ami was trying to cheer up the Kino girl. From
what Mokoti
>knew of her, Kino was as friendless as a leper, but more deserving
of
it. Yet just now he had seen two of the sweetest, gentlest
girls he
>knew be nice to her, and she was nice back.

>"Pleeeeeeease Matoki-san? Please let her in..."

>Looking down at Usagi, Matoki shrugged his shoulders. "All right,
but
just because you and Minako-chan are my two best customers. I
don't
>know what's come over her, but if she starts getting rowdy, she'll
have
to leave right away."
>
"Yay!" Usagi jumped up and waved to her friends so they could
enter.
>"Don't worry about Mako-chan. She's like a different person now,

honestly!"
>
As Usagi bounced off to play games with her friends, Matoki
sighed and
>leaned against the counter. He hoped the blonde girl was right about

Kino Makoto. Usagi seemed happier these days too, and if she had
really
>managed to make the Kino girl into a decent person at the same time,

the world would be a better place. But somehow he felt that
hoping for
>that was like hoping for a miracle.

>Two hours later when the girls left after causing no more
disturbance
than Usagi spilling her drink, Matoki sighed in
relief. Perhaps there
>was such a thing as a miracle after all.

>* * *

>Daimons...

>Sailor Moon could not decided which she hated more. Droids or
Daimons.
Of course, Youma were not all that nice either, but they
had not faced
>any of them for a while. So that left Droids and Daimons. Droids
were
bad, they tended to summon large quantities of Dark Energy

into an area
>and then do all sorts of nasty things, not least of which was trying to
steal people's energy. Daimons on the other hand tried to steal
>people's Heart Crystals, and that was seriously deadly.

>In some ways she preferred facing the Daimons. While the Witches that
controlled them were more powerful than Emerald, at least she was not
>forced to fight Black Lady. Sailor Moon could still not forgive herself
for the fact that Chibi-Usa had been turned into one of the enemy by
>the evil and insidious Prince Diamond.

>How she felt about them was a fairly moot point, considering she had a
job to do, and tonight that job was defeating a Daimon and returning an
>innocent victim's Heart Crystal.

>They had caught the Daimon while it was attacking a girl in the park.
While they had saved the girl, the Daimon was still giving them a hard
>time, and they knew they had to destroy it, otherwise it would just go
out and find more people to prey upon. The only upside to the encounter
>was that there were just the two forces there, good and evil. No Outer
Senshi, no almost-super-powered humans, no Dark Moon Family. It was
>just a nice simple fight between light and dark, where everyone knew
where they stood, and who their enemies were.
>
For the last ten minutes, Sailor Moon had been running around,
constantly harassed by a string of stinging nettles that the Daimon
kept shooting. By her count, Sailor Mars had saved her three times,
>Jupiter twice, and Mercury another three or four times by laying down
concealing fog. The problem they faced was that every time she would
>try to attack, the Daimon would strike first. This kept her on the run,
and the others busy defending her.
>
Sailor Venus had tried to attack the Daimon a couple of times, but her
>attack did not seem to worry it too much. Her Venus Love-Me-Chain would
hold it up for a while, but her Crescent Beam attack - normally so
>effective - made the plant-like Daimon just grow even more.

>Getting up from where she had been hiding behind a park bench, Sailor
Moon looked around. Everyone was puffing and panting, and even Tuxedo
>Kamen looked tired. He was still impeccably dressed and perfectly
groomed - you could expect no less from a hero like him - but his cape
>seemed to flutter with slightly less flourish, and from time to time he
would rest on his cane, rather than brandishing it at their enemy.
>
"Sailor Mercury! Buy us some more time! Please!"
>
"Right, Sailor Moon! MERCURY... BUBBLES... BLAST!"
>
Streaming from the blue haired Senshi's hand, the bubbles quickly
>spread out and became an impenetrable barrier of fog. Used to operating
in those conditions, the Senshi quickly found each

other and gathered
>around.

>"OK, everyone, this is what we're going to do. Mars, Venus, you go
to
the left. Tuxedo Kamen, go with them. If we can, I want it to
think
>Venus is me for a bit and concentrate on her."

>Tuxedo Kamen was not to happy about that, but held his piece as the

Senshi's leader outlined the rest of her plan. "Mercury, you stay
here
>with Jupiter. If you see anyone start to get into trouble, lay down

your fog again. Jupiter, I want you ready to blast any of those
vines
>if they catch someone. Everyone understand?"

>There were nods, but Mars was the first to query the missing point
in
the plan. "And just what do you think you're going to be doing
all this
>time, Meatball Head? While you're all alone? Hmmm?"

>"Well... While you and Venus distracted it, I was going to run over

there by the statue. That way I could blast it from behind..."

>
"Oh, and so what are we supposed to do if it decides to attack
you
>instead?"

>"Umm..."

>"Exactly! Now what I think we should do is---"

>Suddenly Mercury burst in. "Guys! The fog's starting to thin. I
think
we had better do what Sailor Moon says."
>
While Mars grumbled and looked on unhappily, the team broke up
and
>Sailor Moon ran off into the thinning fog by herself. When the last
of
the cover lifted, the Daimon was revealed in all its evil
glory. Like
>them, it had not been wasting its time. The plant-like Daimon had

driven roots into the ground, letting itself grow to even greater

>proportions. As soon as Venus and Mars were revealed, it struck.

>Dozens of rope-like vines shot out of the ground, capturing the two

girls, tying their arms to their side, and preventing more than
the
>slightest motion. Caught by surprise, Sailor Jupiter was still
getting
into a position where she could shoot, and was unable to
help. All
>seemed doomed until a pair of bouquets slices through the vines.

>Bouquets of roses.

>With a hint of dramatic music playing in the background, everyone

turned up to look at a stranger who was standing imperiously on a

>nearby wall. He was tall and handsome, with an aristocratic face and

perfect tailoring. Perfect, that is, if you think a top hat and
cape go
>well with traditional samurai skirt pants and jacket.

>Holding another bouquet in his left hand, the mysterious stranger

raised his bokken to the Daimon and spoke in a strong voice that
echoed
>across the park. "Never let it be said that any man may outdo the
great
and noble Blue Thunder Of Tokyo!"
>
Lightning crashed and thunder roared. As blue lines split the
sky,

>Kuno stood there in his glory.

>"Where this peasant below me throws but a single rose, I shall throw
a
dozen, for the love of the Blue Thunder is surely a dozen times
that of
>any normal man! Come, my darling loves! Free yourself of his
control,
as I have freed you of the foul embrace of this
creature!"
>
Leaping from the wall, the Blue Thunder sailed to the ground,
his cape
>billowing behind him. Having spent countless hours watching footage

that his servants had accumulated from the news, Kuno had
mastered
>Tuxedo Kamen's routine. Pausing only to strike a brief pose, Kuno
went
into battle against the Daimon, his bokken flying this way
and that,
>blocking the strikes from the vines.

>He had barely reached the Daimon and started to attack it when the

Daimon gave a shudder and a moan. Then, before the assembled
Senshi,
>the mysterious Blue Thunder seemed to defeat the Daimon in a single

instant. Briefly it was outlined in gold, then the Daimon turned
black
>and faded into the ground.

>With a smile of victory befitting someone of his greatness, Kuno
turned
and smiled at his true loves. "Ahh! Now that I have
defeated the foul
>beast, surely you are free to date with me!"

>Eyes fixated on Venus and Mars, Kuno gave up any pretence at being

heroic or noble. Arms wide, he charged them, seeking to gather
them up,
>one in each arm. Unfortunately, Sailor Mercury was ready for this.

Expecting to have to hide the Senshi from the Daimon, she had her

>attack prepared, and coated the world once more in a blanket of
white.

>Minutes later, as the fog lifted, Kuno looked around and cursed to

himself. Once again the foul sorcerer that ensnared his true
loves had
>spirited them away. The other girls - lowly types, hardly worth his

notice - were no doubt also pawns in his depraved plans, but Kuno
wept
>at the thought of his beautiful ladies being kept by one so base and

evil.
>
"Ahh", he soliloquised. "If only they were free! They would be
mine, to
>have and hold, to love like no other, and to keep to myself. For am
I
not the great Kuno Tatewaki? Am I not the greatest fighter in
all of
>Japan, yea, all the world? Oh, my loves! I shall free you and make
you
mine!"
>
Meanwhile, across the park and out on the streets, little
Tsukino Usagi
>was trying to convince her friends that it had really been her that
had
dealt the fatal blow to the Daimon. While she insisted that
it was her
>Moon Sceptre Elimination that destroyed it, every other person in
the
team swore blind that it was the enemy leader that had bested
the
>Daimon in a single blow.

>As his girlfriend ran off in a sulk even Chiba Mamoru - the real man

behind the elusive Tuxedo Kamen - was reluctant to admit to her version.
>While he had seen her defeat dozens of enemies in her time, the timing
could not have been that coincidental, could it? From all he had seen,
>the Blue Thunder must be truly powerful, probably more than a match for
Prince Diamond or any of the Witches 5.
>
Usagi couldn't really be right, could she? That would mean that their
>opponent was nothing more than a fraud, someone getting by on posturing
and good luck. And that was just ridiculous...

>
Wasn't it?
>

>End Of Chapter.

>

> <p><p>

8. The Tip Of The Iceberg

> \

> | Vengeance And A Half |
 _____/

>
Thanks to my pre-readers:
>Ben
aevan <http://aevan.virtualave.net>
>Kevin D. Hammel <http://www.anime.sobhrach.com/~khammel/>
>Blood Blade <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Towers/5920>
>Mike Rever

>Visit my website at
dzillman@ozemail.com.au

><http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>
>
Pre-story readiness check:
>Dark Moon Family invading Tokyo... Check
Death Busters active and seeking heart crystals... Check
>Outer Senshi awake with fragmented memories... Check
Sailor Saturn considered threat by all Senshi... Check
>Revenge crazed martial artists ready... Check
Delusional Kuno family... Check
>Inner Senshi and martial artists at war... Check
Outer Senshi and Inner Senshi at war... Check
>Death Busters and Dark Moon Family at war... Check

>Pre-story environment load:
Battle scarred Tokyo... Loaded

>Droids, Daimons and evil infestations... Loaded
Additional misunderstanding... Loaded
>Subtle innuendo and cheesy dialogue... Loaded
Violence and battles... Loading...
> Loading...
 Capacity Reached
>
Story ready...
>Cue cute music...

>
Part 7: The Tip Of The Iceberg

>=====

>Hotaru sat down on the low wall and opened her can of drink. It was hot
and tiring work, but she was not willing to stop. This was something
>that she knew needed to be done, deep down in her soul, all the way

through her body to the marrow of her bones. Ranma-san had done

so much

>for her, this was the only way Hotaru believed that she could repay her
hero.

>
Yesterday she had spent a lot of time with Nabiki-neechan. When she had

>first moved in with Ranma-san, Hotaru thought that Nabiki treated her
like some of the other kids at school used to, but now she knew better.

>Nabiki-neechan treated everyone like that. Where Kasumi-neechan was
warm and friendly and so nice all the time, Nabiki-neechan was always a

>bit more distant... perhaps even a lot more. If you were in the same
room with her, even sitting next to her, the brown haired girl somehow

>made you feel like you were all alone. That was why Hotaru had not
spent a lot of time with the youngest sister, however, as she got to

>know the older girl, she started to understand her better.

>Nabiki-neechan was not cold and distant to just Hotaru. She was like
that to everyone. Somehow that made all of the difference to the little

>girl. So often in the past she had been used to people hating her or at
least being cold and rude that she was used to it. That was why Hotaru

>was so delighted when she realised that Nabiki-neechan did not hate her.
Even if Nabiki-neechan did tend to look at her like a little bug, her

>new big sister did that to everyone, even Ranma-san. Hotaru could not
understand why anyone would dislike Ranma-san, but if Nabiki-neechan

>treated Hotaru the same way Ranma-san was treated, that was good enough.

>When she had worked with the older girl, Hotaru had gone through a
number of Tokyo phone books. There were a lot of people call "Saotome"

>in Tokyo. Actually, there were simply a lot of people living there, so
even uncommon names got repeated. That was where Nabiki-neechan's

>genius had come in. From one of the drawers in her bedside chest,
Nabiki-neechan had pulled out a copy of Ranma-san's birth certificate.

>
Hotaru was still not quite sure why her new sister had a copy of the

>birth certificate, but it did provide some invaluable information on
her idol that she did not know. Information like the name of his mother.

>Saotome Ranma, child of Genma and Nodoka. There it was, in black and
white. That information alone was enough to eliminate all but one name

>from the phone book. Surprisingly, the only reference left in the book
was for "Saotome G & N". After ten years of absence, Ranma-san's mother

>- assuming it was the right one - still kept the phone in both her
husband's and her own name. Devotion and persistence like that showed

>where Ranma-san got his from.

>That was how Hotaru came to be where she was. Nabiki-neechan had helped
her find the address on the map, but the older girl was unable to

>accompany her. While Kasumi-neechan looked after the house,
Nabiki-
neechan looked after the finances. She went out each day,
selling her
>wards and her advice, and that meant she was unable to accompany
Hotaru.
So this morning Hotaru had headed out by herself and
taken the train
>across the city.

>Ranma-san's mother's house was not far away. Normally Ranma-san and
his
friends would walk further in a single night's patrol. Hotaru
knew that
>if she was walking with Ranma-san in the afternoon, she would
probably
walk almost that distance. Despite that, she did not
want to arrive all
>tired and sweaty. If she was going to meet the mother of her idol,
she
wanted to appear at her best.
>
That was why she was resting and having a cooling drink of iced
tea
>from the vending machine. That house, across the street, was the
place.
The place where Ranma-san must have run around as a little
boy. Just
>thinking of her idol as an adorably cute four-year old wearing a pig

tail was enough to make Hotaru smile and hide a giggle behind her
hand.
>
Finishing her drink, Hotaru stood and smoothed out her skirt. It
might
>be the same school uniform she had been wearing since she left home
so
suddenly, but under Kasumi-neechan's care and attention it
still looked
>as fresh and clean as one newly bought off the rack. Hotaru just
hoped
it was good enough for the first time she met Ranma-san's
mother.
>
Walking up to the door of the house, Hotaru took a deep breath,
braced
>her shoulders, then gave a firm knock on the door. There was silence

for so long that Hotaru almost knocked again but just before her
hand
>reached the door she heard footsteps. Shortly afterwards a tall,
mature
woman in a fine looking kimono opened the door and looked
down at her.
>
"Hello. Is the school selling raffle tickets again? I'm afraid I
cannot
>afford any at the moment."

>"N-No..." Twisting her hands in the fabric of her skirt, Hotaru felt

like running in panic. Now that she was here, how was she
supposed to
>talk to a complete stranger like this? How could she have forgotten

what she was meant to say? "A-Are you Saotome Nodoka-sama?"

>
The woman smiled. "Please, there is no need to be that formal.
And yes,
>my name is Saotome Nodoka."

>"_The_ Saotome Nodoka?"

>Nodoka put a tilted her head and thought for a moment. "I'm not
sure. I
think I'm just _a_ Saotome Nodoka. I would not be
surprised if there
>was another person with the same name as me in Japan somewhere. I
don't
imagine you could be a little more specific, dear? Don't
tell me I won
>something from that school exhibition day I attended a while ago.

Honestly, I was just doing it because I like being around young

>children like you."

>Hotaru flushed. Of course it was a silly question. "S-Sorry. I'm a

little nervous... Are you... Are you Ranma-san's mother? Do you
have a
>son that is a martial artist?"

>Faster than Hotaru's eyes could track, Nodoka was out of the door
way
and kneeling in front of her. Nodoka had the startled girl
held by each
>shoulder and she looked her seriously in the face. With a shaking
voice
and eyes that shimmered with barely restrained tears,
Nodoka forced
>herself to ask slowly. "Do... Do you know my son? Do you know where
he
is?"
>
"Y--" Her head had only begun to nod, and the word was not out
of her
>mouth fully before she was swamped in the embrace of the woman.

>Holding the little girl tightly, Nodoka felt an incredible,

indescribable relief flooding through her system. For ten years
she had
>not seen her son. For ten years she had heard nothing more than the

occasional postcard written in her husband's appalling
handwriting and
>even those had dried up and ceased months ago. In the whole ten
years
since he left, she had not seen a single photo of her son
growing up,
>nor had she received even a single word written by him on one of

Genma's infrequent cards.
>
The part of her that feared, the part of her that was a
reasonable
>woman first and a mother second had long ago begun insisting that

something terrible must have happened to her son. The part that
was a
>mother, the part with unlimited determination and patience - that

unreasonable and irrational part of her mind - continued to
insist that
>her son was alive and well. Someday she hoped she would be reunited

with him, but over time that hope had become thinner and thinner.

>Without realising it, Nodoka found that she had no longer really

believed in that fond hope. Now that the hope had been restored,
Nodoka
>found it like a great tearing pain in her chest, as though something

lost had been returned and the out-swelling of love was trying to
push
>aside all other emotions in her body.

>Startled by Nodoka's reaction, Hotaru stood dumbfounded for long

moments as the woman held her and great wracking sobs of relief
shook
>her body. After a time, Hotaru reached up and tentatively put her
hands
around Nodoka's shoulders and returned the hug. She did not
have the
>woman's strength or enthusiasm, but she could sympathise. She knew
that
if she were separated from someone like Ranma-san as long as
his mother
>had been, she would be upset too.

>The tableaux held like that for many long minutes. When Nodoka
finally
regained control of herself and took stock of where they
were a blush

>crossed her features. Here she was, a decent and respectable Japanese
woman, showing all her emotions out in public like this. Breathing
>deeply, she pulled her emotions back inside herself and stood up.

Brushing tears of joy aside, Nodoka reached out a hand and smiled down
>at the little girl.

>"Please, Dear. Come inside. Tell me, please, tell me everything about
my son. I... I haven't seen him in such a long time, and I want to know
>what he has been up to. I want..." She hiccupped and blinked back some
more tears of joy. "I think perhaps I should try to calm down a little
>before I go and visit him, hmm?"

>"Nnn." Hotaru took the offered hand and walked into the house. It was
not quite the reception she had been expecting, but then, she was not
>sure what she had expected.

>The house, like the woman that owned it, was neat and perfectly
maintained. Some tasteful and simple paintings hung on one wall, while
>the furniture was all elegant and perfectly positioned. Unlike her
father's home, this one was very traditionally Japanese. The floor was
>all plain tatami mats, and the furniture was lacquered wood. Also
unlike her father's home, this place spoke of both refined taste and no
>excessive spending of money. Most things looked like they had been
cleaned or polished many times, but there was none of the expensive
>trinkets or vases that her father had. To Hotaru's inexperienced eye it
appeared as though someone cared very deeply for the house, although
>she failed to notice the signs of just how little income Nodoka had and
how that adversely affected her ability to replace anything that became
>damaged or worn out.

>"Please, take a seat. I shall prepare some tea for us."

>Positioning her self on a cushion in front of the low table, Hotaru
watched Nodoka walk off and nodded slightly to herself. It was easy to
>see where Ranma-san got her beautiful skin and hair from. Hotaru could
not remember what her own mother looked like, but she hoped that when
>she was Nodoka-sama's age, she would age as well as Ranma-san would.

>The tea took a while, but when Nodoka returned she was cleaned up and
as well composed as when she first opened the door. Placing a ceramic
>mug in front of Hotaru, Nodoka filled it with steaming green tea, then
filled one for herself. Once they had each taken a sip of the hot liquid,
>Nodoka placed hers on the table, then sketched a short seated bow.

>"Please forgive me for being a poor hostess. I am afraid I have no
biscuits or buns to eat while we talk. I so rarely have visitors

>that..." Nodoka trailed off for a moment looking embarrassed at her
lack of etiquette and provisioning. "If I may, Dear, I am afraid

that I
>did not catch your name."

>Now it was Hotaru's turn to blush in embarrassment. She had been

invited into someone's home, and she had not even given her name.
"T-
>Tomoe Hotaru, Saotome-sama."

>"Hotaru-chan... That's a pretty name. But please, you do not need to
be
so formal."
>
"B-But... You're Ranma-san's mother!" Hotaru exclaimed, as
though that
>explained everything. 'Surely the mother of someone like Ranma-san

deserved all the respect you could possibly give', she thought.

>
For a moment, Nodoka smiled in absolute bliss. To hear someone
other
>than herself speak her son's name. Even more, to hear it said with
such
adulation, such respect; it made her heart sing. To have it
said by a
>pretty young girl in reference to her son also made it all the
sweeter.
Reaching across the table, Nodoka placed a hand on
Hotaru's. "Hotaru-
>chan... Please, fulfil this mother's most earnest desire. Please...

Please tell me about my son... Is he everything my husband
promised he
>would be when he took my boy away?"

>"I don't know what Ranma-san's father promised, Saotome-sama, but

Ranma-san is the most amazing person alive! He's smart and he's
funny
>and he is absolutely incredible!"

>Heaven! "Dearest was going to train our son in the way of Anything
Goes
Martial Arts. Do.. Do you know if my son has learnt the art
well?"
>
Hotaru clenched her hands beneath her chin and her eyes
shimmered as
>she remembered how he had been training her. She remembered when she

had watched Ranma-san fighting with Ryoga-san or the horrible
demons
>they fought. "Ranma-san is the best martial artist in all of
Japan!
Absolutely everyone thinks so... At least all of the smart
ones do.
>He's so strong, and he's really, really fast! What's more he's got
this
thing where he sort of... umm... moves his hands like this
and... Well,
>I can't really describe it, but no-one can beat him. Not only that,
but
I'm sure he knows absolutely everything when it comes to
fighting.
>_I'm_ going to be his student!"

>"Oh, Ranma!" Nodoka felt her heart just bursting with pride. After
all
this time! After all this time, she finally learns that her
son is
>still alive, and he is everything she ever hoped for and more.
Casting
a quick look at Hotaru, Nodoka tried to gauge her age.
Fairly young,
>but then, a real man plans for the future and not just the present.

"How do you know Ranma-kun, Dear?"
>
Hotaru turned away and went a little red in the face. She was
not sure
>how Ranma-san's mother was going to take this. "Ano... Actually, I
live
with him..."
>
Pride threatened to make her heart explode. Her son! An

unmarried boy

>and girl, living together! How manly! "Living together..." She

whispered in delighted awe.

>
"N-No, it's not like that, really! I'm staying with

Kasumi-neechan and

>Nabiki-neechan at their home. Ranma-san was living with them!"

>Now Nodoka did need to brace herself. Even Genma had never been that

manly. He had a hard enough time keeping up with her, but their

son! Oh,

>their darling, manly son! Three ladies, all in the one house!

Sisters
nonetheless! And still he managed to fill this girl with

such respect

>and adulation. "How old are your sisters, Dear?"

>"They're not really my sisters, I just like to pretend, because they

treat me so nicely. Umm... I think Kasumi-neechan is nineteen,

and I'm

>pretty sure Nabiki-neechan is seventeen or eighteen. She's very

mature
and intelligent."

>
Ohhh, older women! Nodoka was impressed. Girls usually liked

older men,

>but if her son could charm them, he must be everything she had hoped

for. She wondered which one he would end up marrying. She could

hardly

>restrain herself from crowing in delight and proclaiming her son's

greatness to everyone in the neighbourhood. "Well, I shall look

forward

>to meeting them, in that case. But please, tell me, how did you meet

Ranma-kun?"

>
A look of pain washed across Hotaru's face and she looked away

from the

table.

>"Oh, I'm sorry, Dear. Did I say something wrong?"

>"N-No." Hotaru braced herself and began her story. "I first met

Ranma-
san when he saved my life. I was... I was walking through

Tokyo going

>to help some of these magical girls, when they turned around and

tried
to kill me. I... I think they would have succeeded if

Ranma-san hadn't

>come along and saved me. You see, I didn't realise they were Sailor

Senshi then. Now I know. Now I know that the Sailors want to kill

me,

>and... and Ranma-san seems to save me every time!"

>Tears fell from the small girl's eyes by the time she finished.

Discomforted by the girl's distress, Nodoka was still surprised

by what

>she had heard. Although the Senshi did not always get favourable

reporting in the newspaper, Nodoka thought they seemed to have

their

>heart in the right place; most of the time. To actually believe they

were trying to kill you... "It's OK, Dear. I'm sure---"

>
Hotaru shook her head, sending tears flying. "No, it's not OK.

First my

>Daddy was hurt by those nasty demons, now the Senshi are always

trying
to hurt me, and it's not fair! If... If it wasn't for

Ranma-san... If

>Ranma-san didn't save me every time... If Ranma-san wasn't the

greatest
martial artist in the whole wide world... Then...

Then... Then they

>would have gotten me..."

>Deciding to abandon propriety and formality, Nodoka slid around the

table and took the crying girl in her arms. She had been
impressed that
>her son was living with a young girl, but now she was beginning to
see
things in a different light. Perhaps Hotaru-chan had a
different reason
>for living with her son. Her son, possibly a manly and heroic
saviour
of damsels deeply distressed? Could something so
wonderful even be
>possible?

>When Hotaru felt like talking again, she did not release Nodoka from

her tight grip but instead spoke from beside her. "It all began
when
>Ranma-san saved me after I ran away from my Daddy. Somehow...
Somehow
Daddy's mean and creepy helper did something to him. I
always told him
>that Kaolinite was bad for him, but I think she had already started
to
take over his mind by then. When... When I left, he wasn't
even my
>Daddy any more. He tried to hurt me, tried to make me like he was;
and
my Daddy would never do that. He even said he had taken over
my Daddy's
>body.

>"After that, Ranma-san found me when those horrible Sailor Senshi
were
trying to kill me. I was so scared, but Ranma-san jumped in
from
>nowhere and carried me to safety. It was just like in all the manga!

Ranma-san was so brave and fast! If it wasn't for him, I don't
think I
>would be alive today."

>Hotaru paused for a moment, trying to sort out what was important
and
what was not. "That was just the first time he saved me.
After that he
>did it again and again. Every time I go on patrol with Ranma-san and

his friends, it seems like someone wants to hurt me. But
Ranma-san is
>always there to save me, no matter how big and bad and mean they
are.
When I grow up, I want to be like Ranma-san. He's teaching
me martial
>arts too, so I can be!"

>"Patrol? What do you mean, 'patrol'?" It was not very manly to take
a
little girl like Hotaru-can out looking for trouble. Her son
had better
>have a good excuse.

>Talking about what Ranma did seemed to brighten Hotaru. Perhaps it
was
simply having something other than her own problems to think
about, or
>more likely it was the fact that she was talking about her favourite

subject. "Well, every night Ranma-san and his friends go out and
patrol
>the city, trying to keep it safe from all of the demons, Senshi and
the
bad magical girls that are out there.
>
"I'm not sure what really happened, because no-one likes to talk
about
>it really, but I think Kasumi-neechan's little sister was killed by
one
of the Senshi when she was fighting off a demon. Ano... Not
Nabiki-
>neechan, but another sister, I think her name was Akane. I never met

her, but sometimes Ranma talks about her. I think he really

misses her,
>because that's why he and Ryoga-san are doing this. I think... I think
Akane-san might have been his fiancée or girlfriend, but I'm not sure.
>I didn't really want to ask.

>"At night... When it's really quiet... Sometimes I can hear him talking
about her in his sleep. It's really, really sad."

>
Nodoka closed her eyes and cursed the fact that she let Genma take away
>her son. By all accounts he must have done a truly stellar job raising
their son, but a mother's place was beside her children. She did not
>even know that her son had a fiancée - and although she hoped he had
many girlfriends, she could not be sure. Now she hears second hand that
>her son is going through a traumatic time in his life, and she is not
there for him. It made her feel less of a person, less of a mother for
>not being able to help him in his time of need.

>"What about you, Dear? Why are you doing this? Why are you going on
patrol with my son? Surely it is too dangerous for a young lady like
>yourself."

>For a moment Hotaru considered keeping her magical girl powers secret
from Ranma-san's mother but that moment passed quickly. Hotaru being a
>magical girl was more of an "open secret" than anything else.

Practically everyone she knew was aware of her powers. Ranma-san and
>all his friends, her Daddy and whoever had hurt him... By now, even the
Sailor Senshi probably knew who she was, and they were just too
>frightened to come and attack her at the Tendo's home because Ranma-san
lived there too, and they knew he would beat them all up if they made
>him mad.

>"You probably won't believe me, no-one ever does until they can see my
powers, but I'm the most powerful magical girl in the whole world. I
>might not be able to use my attacks, but I've got a really good shield
spell, and I can heal people, too. I even healed Ranma-san in a fight
>once. I was standing back so that I wouldn't get in anyone's way, and
that meant I was able to help him." Hotaru ended on a wistful note,
>remembering her one real moment of triumph and glory so far.

>Nodding in understanding, Nodoka spoke with only a trace of
condescension in her voice. "Ahh. You want to be with my son, so you
>follow him wherever he goes. While I'm sure I can understand that, I do
not think I really approve of you getting into fights. It's just not
>proper for young girls like you."

>"The Sailor Senshi do."

>"The Sailor Senshi are..." She could not exactly say myths; while she
had thought that was the case, Hotaru evidently did not. "... a special
>case."

>Silence descend for a time, with neither person quiet sure how to

continue the conversation. Abruptly, Nodoka gave a start and covered
>her mouth in embarrassment. "Oh, please forgive me. I just realised

that this entire time I have been wearing you out with stories about my
>son, but I know nothing about you. Please, tell me about yourself."

>"Ano... My name is Tomoe Hotaru, and I'm twelve years old...."
Nodoka
waited patiently for Hotaru to continue.
>
When the silence become uncomfortable and Hotaru began to shift

>nervously, Nodoka tried to suggest something to talk about. "That's

lovely, Dear, but what about hobbies or sports that you like?"

>
"I... don't really like sports, and I've never really had any hobbies.
>Actually, that's not quite right. I'm starting to learn martial arts

now! That way I can be just as strong as Ranma-san or Shampoo-san. Wow,
>I can finally say I do a sport! Isn't that great?"

>"That's lovely, Hotaru-chan. I'm sure my husband would say you chose

the right thing to do. Personally, I think a young lady like yourself
>should devote herself more to the womanly arts and making herself a

better bride, but I can understand why you are interested in martial
>arts. Anything that could get you closer to that fine, manly son of

mine, right?"
>
Hotaru went as red as the printing on Nodoka's kimono. "That's not the
>only reason!" Then she went even redder as she realised what she had

said.
>
When Nodoka finished her good natured laugh at Hotaru's discomfort, she
>continued to try and get more details on both Hotaru and her son. As

the hands of the clock seemed to sprint around the face, Hotaru spoke
>only little about herself. She no longer went to school because her

father taught where she used to go, and she did not have any friends to
>miss. Having so little to say about herself, Hotaru more than made up

for it with her verbosity on the subject of Saotome Ranma. When she
>spoke about him, Hotaru was quite willing and able to talk for hours.

>As the hands of the clock sneaked past two in the afternoon, Hotaru

suddenly realised she was running late for her lessons with Ranma. They
>may only be a chance to walk together and improve her endurance at the

moment, but she had been assured that everything was training. That
>meant that even just talking a leisurely walk with her idol was really

improving her martial arts skills.
>
Bowling to her hostess and explaining why she needed to rush off, Hotaru
>made her way to the entry hall. As she pulled on her shoes, Nodoka

stood behind her and waited patiently.
>
"Hotaru-chan, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for

>bringing me this wonderful news about my son. I know I am imposing upon
you, but is there any chance that I may be able to join you this evening, so that I can meet Ranma? It has been ten long years since I
have seen my boy."

>
Hotaru was mortified. How could she have forgotten to ask Ranma-san's mother to come and visit. "Ahh! Saotome-sama! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I
forgot to ask you to come over for dinner before we leave. I meant to, >honestly! That was why I came here in the first place. Please, have
this invitation!"

>
Bending to almost a right angle at the waist, Hotaru held a white envelope out to her hostess with both hands. She did not look up until
Nodoka took it, and even then she was careful, somehow afraid that >Ranma-san's mother would be angry with her for forgetting something
like that. Instead, tears flowed down the woman's cheeks as she read >what was written.

>The note was only a short one, but it politely invited Saotome Nodoka
to join her husband, son and all their friends for dinner and a reunion >at the Tendo Dojo, address provided. Hotaru had intended it to be a
special reunion, and she had written the note in her best handwriting, >even going to so far as to borrow some nice paper from Nabiki-nee-chan.
Not only that, but Kasumi-nee-chan had offered to cook something very >special if Hotaru managed to really find Ranma's mother.

>Choked up by happiness, Nodoka's eyes streamed tears of joy. Unable to
speak, she could only nod silently before gathering the small girl in >another grateful hug. Eventually, as her voice returned, she whispered
"Thank you" over and over again.

>
When Hotaru was finally able to leave, Nodoka closed the door and >breathed deeply. As she tried to sort out her overwhelming emotions she
leaned against the hallway wall. She could barely stand or think >straight because she was so happy but she had so much to do. In just a
few hours she needed to clean herself up and prepare a good kimono for >her meeting. Just as importantly, she needed to take down Genma's
solemn promise where the document stood in her family shrine.

>
Every day she prayed to the shrine, prayed that Genma would succeed in >making Ranma a man among men, and that his conditions on the contract
would be met. Today, she would finally be able to burn that horrible >piece of paper. Her small guest had left no doubt in her mind as to
Ranma's manliness, and she would so enjoy being able to spend a single >day without the fear of needing to behead her own son for failure to
comply.

>
Walking towards the bathroom so that she could clean up, Nodoka sighed.

>Only a few hours to go, and she would be with her son again. An

unquestionable man among men.
>
* * *
>
Kuno Kodachi sat at the base of her statue and ran a hand along
one of
>the finely carved legs. In all of her sixteen years on this planet,
she
could not remember ever seeing a finer or more beautiful
statue. The
>gorgeous, stunning and refined lady of the statue had grown in size

under her care and friendship. Now the black crystal vision of

>perfection almost reached the ceiling of the room, and was a good
two
and a half meters tall.
>
The statue also no longer looked like the dumpy old woman it had
when
>she first saw it. Now the statue looked like Kodachi in all her
glory.

>Focusing on happy thoughts, Kodachi stood and ran her hand along the

statue's arm. Where before the crystal hand had been empty, it
now
>contained a rose. A black rose, made of the finest, sharpest crystal

Kodachi could envisage.
>
She had quickly discovered how to make the statue grow. It had
been
>easy in so many ways, since nurturing plants worked in almost
exactly
the same fashion. Focus on happy thoughts, on bright,
clean, clear
>images of a better future and the crystal would respond as you
desired.

>Naturally this technique required that you could focus on two

completely separate ideas at the same time - the happy thoughts
and the
>guiding path for the crystal - but being of noble Kuno blood Kodachi

had no problem acting as though she had multiple people running
around
>inside her skull, each doing their own thing.

>Deciding that she had made the statue tall enough, she wanted to
keep
it growing, and came up with a new plan. Rather than
crafting something
>of pure beauty - her own image - she would expand the base, building
up
an entire scene from the crystal. Kneeling down again in front
of the
>black crystalline mass, Kodachi let her mind focus, for once
allowing
the guiding influence and her happy thoughts to become
one and the same.
>
It began as a bulge of black crystal near the statue's feet, but

>shortly the mass began to take shape, adopting the lines of the
happy
thought that Kodachi had spent so much time focusing on
recently. To
>her, it was an image of how her Martial Arts Rhythmic Gymnastics
match
should have ended. Her in triumph, with the despicable
pig-tailed
>haridan at her feet.

>The Pig-Tailed Girl's face was now clearly visible in the crystal.

Everything from her wide open mouth in a silent scream to the
lines
>around her eyes spoke of limitless fear and pain. This was Kodachi's

happy thought. The Pig-Tailed Girl in pain. The Pig-Tailed Girl

>suffering. The Pig-Tailed Girl humiliated in public and cowering at the

feet of the mighty Kuno Kodachi. It was a happy thought that Kodachi
>had treasured for many long months, and it was one that allowed her to

craft and beautify her statue.
>
Simply watching the statue take form brought forth more and more detail
>of the Pig-Tailed Girl's predicament into her mind. This in turn made

it take form in black crystal, leading Kodachi on to new imagined
>heights of merciless sadism and torture.

>If only it were within her power to have the real Pig-Tailed Girl at

her mercy like this. To have her bound and scarred, her wounds forever
>denying her the beauty needed to tempt Ranma-sama. To have her begging

for mercy that would never come. Kodachi would gleefully start with the
>Pig-Tailed Girl and then work her way onto every other girl that would

dare to try and seduce her beloved Ranma-sama. She would make them pay
>for their sins like the pitiful figure in the statue.

>Oh, how she would make them pay.

>"So that is how one of our Black Crystals came to be activated."

>The voice was deep and gravely. But cold. So very cold. Cold like the

blackest reaches of space. Cold like the depths of the ocean. Cold like
>even a minute without the love of her darling Ranma-sama. It was a

voice that bred despair and fear. It sent shivers up your spine and
>made Kodachi think of her dear mother's last hours.

>She loved the voice from the first moment she heard it. If her Ranma-

sama could possibly be any more perfect, he would possess that voice.
>
Despite the way she treasured the voice, and knew she would dream
>longingly of it when she slept tonight, Kodachi turned around with

imperial slowness to cast down whomever would be so bold as to enter
>the halls of Kuno uninvited. When she reached the owner of the voice

and appraised its menial appearance, she decided that the body and garb
>that went with the voice left much to be desired.

>The man, if indeed it was a man, wore a loose grey cloak that covered

him head to toe. The cloak, which almost seemed to be made out of
>shadows itself, was all she could really see of the man other than his

hands. He was seated on the floor in a cross-legged manner, and the
>cowl was pulled far forwards, sending his face into impenetrable

darkness.
>
The man's hands had long, pale fingers that never quite managed to
>remain still. The hands - almost deathly white - were perfectly clean

as though they belonged to an embalmed corpse. But no corpse's hands
>had ever moved so freely around the shifting, multicoloured crystal

ball that seemed to hover in the man's lap. Those hands did not seem to
>achieve anything with their motion, but they did not stop, and he

did
not speak again.
>
"Of course you realise, peasant, that you are trespassing on the lands
>of the Kuno." Kodachi turned up her nose at him in an insulting and

upper class fashion.
>
"You must forgive me, Kuno Kodachi-sama. I have come here only to view
>your work. To see what dark energy could have fuelled such growth in my
crystal."
>
"You know my name." It was not a question. Someone of a Kuno's rank did
>not question minions. They simply ordered them.

>"I know a great many things. It does appear that I did not truly

appreciate your talent before becoming witness myself. Until this day,
>I believed myself to be the only one capable of shaping the Dark

Crystal to my designs."
>
Kodachi laughed in her most ladylike manner. She always thought it was
>important for lesser people to know when they had amused her.
Reaching
over to where the Pig-Tailed Girl knelt in unending tribute to pain and
>retribution, Kodachi extended her hand and rested it on the crystal for
a moment. Thinking about a fitting end to intruders, Kodachi closed her
>hand around a newly created pommel and drew forth a long shard of

crystal. With the beauty of thought and action becoming one, the shard
>formed into a gleaming, razor sharp sword, while the Pig-Tailed Girl's
side developed a matching sized open, bleeding wound to match where the
>weapon had been drawn forth.

>Pointing her new sword at the grey cloaked intruder, Kodachi gave a

short laugh. "As you can see, I can cause the crystal to do whatever I
>desire. Unfortunately for you, you will not be able to see the final

form of my masterpiece. For - as with all intruders this far into our
>home - you shall not be heard from again. I would ask a servant to

perform the service, but I fear they would not enjoy the work

>sufficiently."

>She could not see his face, but Kodachi could swear she felt the

unnamed man smile at her. Without a single change in his actions or a
>single word, the sword melted back from him. Flowing like it was alive,
the crystal seemed to build upon itself until she held not a sword, but
>a miniature of her own statue. Complete down to the tiniest detail, the
gorgeous work of herself with a cowering Pig-Tailed Girl was all that
>remained of her weapon.

>"As you can see, I have some skill in how to work the crystal...
My
crystal. You would do well never to forget that,
Kodachi-sama. It is I
>that controls the Dark Crystal of Nemesis. No other. I may allow you to
use it, but it always I that am the master."
>
Kodachi frowned then abruptly dropped the miniature on the cold marble
>floors where it shattered into a million pieces. "It would appear

that
you are right... For a peasant, you are most tiring and tenacious.

>However..."

>Silently, Kodachi stepped aside from the seated man and gestured to her
work of artistry. "However, you plainly do not have my skill or talent.

>I am not blind to the happenings of our fair city, and I recognised the
form of the statue on the news. Twenty meters tall and breaking through

>a building so that all can see, and yet you still persist in such crude
sculpture? Honestly, even a peasant such as yourself should have some

>appreciation for art."

>If the man resented her remark, he gave no sign of it. Over the last
month and a half, Emerald had been placing statues of herself at power

>points located throughout the city. Wherever she activated one, it
would immediately begin to tap into the dark energy surrounding it

>while simultaneously pulling more power from the massive Dark Crystal
that form the meteor Nemesis far in the outer reaches of Earth's solar

>system. Naturally, as the energy came in, the statue grew until it was
obvious to even the likes of the Sailor Senshi. At times like those,

>someone would turn up to try and thwart their plans by destroying the
statue.

>
Occasionally the flashier episodes like these would be captured on the

>news, and the world would get to see the Senshi's or the Death Buster's
victory over him. However no-one had ever seen his minions' victories

>in placing non-activated crystals like the one Kodachi had found. Only
when the Dark Moon Family was ready would they activate those. Only

>then would the residents of Tokyo know true fear.

>"I regret that it is true, I lack your... finesse... with the Dark
Crystal. Where I can control and wield the powers it offers, I do not

>have your subtlety. I can cause the Crystal to copy your work, but I
cannot create it myself. The statues I made for my servant are

>functional, but they do not have the... the detail or the loving care
that yours does. I can see in this a degree of passion and accuracy

>that deserves to be recognised."

>"Ohh! Ho ho ho ho ho!" A lady should be polite enough to hide her
mouth when she laughed, and Kodachi was no exception. Head thrown back

>in laughter, her left hand was held in front of her face so that she
could enjoy herself without any impropriety. "I can assure you that the

>skills of any Kuno, myself in particular, far exceed that of any
commoner."

>
Again there was that sensation that the hooded figure was smiling

>condescendingly. "I will concede to your skill, Kodachi-sama, but I
cannot concede to your power."

>
"Oh, really? You could doubt the strength of Kuno Kodachi?" In a flash,

>a ribbon of crystal appeared in her hands. With practice it was

becoming easier to control, and her anger with the man that
mocked her
>provided ample fuel to make the crystal grow to the length and

flexibility she desired. Spinning the crystal ribbon over her
head like
>she had practiced so often in gymnastics, Kodachi began striking out
to
either side of the man in black.
>
"Since you really want to come into my home and then dare to
question
>my abilities in any way... Take this! And this! And this!" With
cracks
like a bull whip, the crystal ribbon sounded to either
side of the man.
>Throughout it all, he sat there, unchanged. At no time did her
dodge,
nor did his hands ever cease their erratic movement around
his glowing
>ball.

>"That is not the true power of the Dark Crystal Kodachi-sama. For
all
your artistry, only I can open you to the true power of
Nemesis. Only
>once the crystal is truly activated can it draw on the power needed
to
do this..." Then his hand did stop its movement. Briefly the
man raised
>his right hand palm forwards and directed a brilliant beam of dark

purple energy down the hall.
>
Attracted by the beam and the tremendous explosion, Kodachi's
head
>whipped around. Certainly, her guest had just made a massive hole in

one of their walls, but that was something she could forgive. Her

>Ranma-sama was prone to doing the same thing when he visited, but
she
had never seen him do anything like this man had done. How
could this
>man possess energy and power capable of smashing walls and
demolishing
her foes with equal ease? She must have it!
>
As she turned back to the man, her mouth hanging open slightly,
Kodachi
>saw her statue. The statue she had poured so much energy into over

recent days had shrunk. Where before it had been a good two and a
half
>metres tall, now it was barely waist height. "W-What happened to my

beautiful statue?"
>
The hooded figure gave a low chuckle that caused the hairs on
the back
>of her neck to stand up in a most enticing manner as shivers ran up
and
down her spine. "That is the true power of the Dark Crystal.
That
>crystal you are so fond of it a shard from Nemesis, an asteroid

floating through the outer reaches of our solar system. An
asteroid
>composed entirely of negative energy.

>"As you fed your negative energy into the statue, you caused it to
grow.
Hate, envy, pain, fear. All these negative feelings are the
energy
>source of the Dark Crystal. But all that energy is useless unless it

can be used, and only I can grant the permission to use that
power. For
>I am the Wiseman, and I am the master of the Dark Crystal of
Nemesis. I,
and those people I grant permission to may use the
power of the Dark

>Crystal. That is what happened to your statue. When I used its power,
it shrunk, but it is still there. Nemesis is filled with dark energy
>like this, more power than would be needed to cover this entire
planet."
>
There was silence. "Give it to me."
>
"I said give me the power of the Dark Crystal, you fool. I am Kuno
>Kodachi, and I demand that you give me this power."

>"I am willing to give you access to the power... On some conditions..."

>Kodachi's eyes narrowed. She knew this man was crafty. She could feel
it. The man, Wiseman he called himself, oozed the same confidence as
>Tendo Nabiki. No doubt he was just as trustworthy... But that did not
matter, Kuno Kodachi was willing to deal with anyone she needed to so
>that she could acquire what was hers by right. If that meant she needed
to accept his conditions now and then renegotiate them later, so be it.
>Once she had access to all of that lovely power and had it under her
control, she knew she would entirely capable of taking control in the
>manner that befitted someone of her station.

>"And what sort of conditions would you seek to impose upon the eldest
daughter of the House of Kuno?"
>
"Perhaps I should elucidate upon you what you would be getting in
>exchange for your compliance. When I give you access to the powers of
the Dark Crystal, you will be capable of so much more than that pitiful
>attack that I just demonstrated. That attacked drew its power from the
statue behind you, and that statue is tiny. Filled only with the dark
>energies that you had been able to imbue in it, there was barely enough
power to be able to knock a hole in the wall.

>
"Nemesis is an asteroid, a crystal of pure dark energy kilometres long.
>That much dark energy gathered together is a self-generating source of
hatred, greed, violence, anger and depression. All of the dark emotions
>that cloud the human soul are manifest there, growing upon each other
to create the ultimate weapon. Nemesis is the ultimate power, and with
>it you could achieve anything you desired. All I ask in return is that
you obey me and aid in my bringing that power to earth."

>
"Such power..." Kodachi uttered. "Such power within my grasp. With that
>sort of power, my darling Ranma-sama would worship me as a Queen. I
could crush all of my enemies. I could do anything I desired! Ranma-
>sama would be mine! I, Kuno Kodachi would be the Queen of Tokyo, no...
Japan. Better yet, the whole world!"
>
The Wiseman chuckled softly as her laugh rang out, shaking the walls of
>the house with its intensity. "Yes, Kodachi-sama. You would work quite
well beside Prince Diamond as both of you serve me bringing the dark

>energy into this world."

>Mid-cackle, Kodachi suddenly went silent. "_Prince_ Diamond?"

>The Wiseman said nothing while she stared at him. "Prince Diamond,

hmm?... I'm not sure if I find that acceptable. For if I am to be
Queen

>and Ranma-sama is to be by my side, I hardly think that it is
fitting
that there is another man calling himself 'Prince'. I am
afraid that

>you will have to get rid of him. It's just not acceptable."

>That cause him to pause. Before he came to see Kodachi, he had

considered countless options. Everything from her being an
unassailable

>agent of good to her falling into his clutches as quickly and easily
as
she had. However, he had never considered she would take
exception to

>Prince Diamond without ever meeting him.

>"Kodachi-sama, his name is just that, a name. Prince Diamond is no
more
a prince than the next man in the street. As you can well
imagine, our

>highly public positions combined with the need to induce fear and

respect in our opponents has lead many in our position to adopt

>pseudonyms. Diamond's minions are known as Emerald and Rubius,

establishing a pattern at the same time as showing their
subservience

>to him."

>With a disdainful sniff, Kodachi turned and walked down the hallway

slightly. As she walked, she tapped her chin in though,
unconsciously

>talking aloud. "What you say has merit. I begin to understand why
you
are styled as the Wiseman... Perhaps what I need is something
similar.

>It would hardly do to reveal my true name to all of the plebeians
and
commoners filling out city, lest they become jealous and
torment my

>dear brother unduly...

>"While I could not doubt use a name to place me in ascendancy over
this
Prince Diamond, he may well be a useful pawn for the time
being. Until

>I have taken full control of this marvellous power, I may need to
rely
upon these cretins in some way. Very well then, I shall wait
a time

>until I declare myself Supreme Queen Goddess Over All. It would not
due
to intimidate my erstwhile allies too much initially."

>
Reaching the end of one block of thought, Kodachi turned and
began back

>towards the calmly waiting Wiseman. "I am thinking that I should
begin
to indoctrinate people at an early stage to my stature and
magnificence.

>Something more refined than my current appellation. Wiseman! Attend
me!
From this day forth, I shall be known as... Black Lady!"

>
For an instant, the Wiseman's hands stopped their endless motion
over

>his crystal ball. "That... Would not be advisable, Kodachi-sama.

Unfortunately, I had not yet informed you that I recently
recruited a

>lady of most extraordinary power. While her craft and meticulous,

precise skill pale in comparison to yours, she wields power with
a
>skill unusual in one so young. This person, who travels by the name
of
Black Lady, is unlikely to be pleased with your choice of
names, and
>her ability to direct the power of Nemesis is second only to mine.
May
I beg you to consider another name, Kodachi-sama?"

>
"Humph. Well, if some commoner has already begun to sully the
name with
>her usage, it would hardly be fitting for someone as fine as myself
to
use. Very well, then. As for so many years I have been the
shining
>young start of the high school gymnastics circuit, a flower amongst

weeds, I shall grow beyond being simply the Black Rose of Saint

>Hebereke High School. I shall now be... The Black Rose! Soon to be
the
Supreme Queen Goddess Over All!"

>
Once again Kodachi threw her head back and laughed. Obviously
this was

>some sort of sign. She had worked so hard to find a name that would

instil both fear and respect in her peers, and now she can take
that

>name onto the stage of the world to begin the next act in the drama

that was her life.

>
The Wiseman smiled, he was very happy. The Black Rose would make
a fine

>addition to his forces. Physically she was beautiful, her demeanour
was
cool and cruel, the only thing that came close to matching
her ego was

>her considerable skill, and she was mercifully free from the burdens
of
intelligence. As far as the Wiseman was concerned, only one
person in

>the Dark Moon Family had any business thinking, and that was him.

Prince Diamond could play at being the leader all he liked, so
long as

>he and his followers obeyed the Wiseman. He felt sure that this Kuno

Kodachi would follow his gentle guidance, and when the time came
to

>replace Prince Diamond, she would be a fitting pawn in his
downfall.

>Joining the Black Rose as she laughed, the Wiseman was a bass rumble

beside her soprano. Even while they laughed and enjoyed
themselves, the

>Wiseman kept thinking of what needed to be done to ensure his
success.
The next thing on his list was to grant the Black Rose
her new powers,

>and to give her a taste of what it really meant to swear fealty to

someone of his power.

>
Reaching out with a mental command, the Wiseman activated the
statue,

>removing the metaphysical stopcocks that prevented it from sucking
up
dark energy from all around. As soon as he did so, alternating
rings of

>dark purple and black began to pulse out from the centre. With each

beat, with each wave of power being drawn in, the statue grew.

Rather

>than taking a whole night to grow to roof size as it had under

Kodachi's ministrations, it now took only moments.

>
"Ahh, that feels so good. Surely this place must be the site of a great
>and abiding evil to provide so much dark energy for my statue. Come,

Black Rose. Join me, feel the power that is now yours to
command!" As
>he said the words, the Wiseman opened a connection from Nemesis to
the
Kodachi. As with evil throughout the centuries, he could
offer the
>temptation, but he could not force you into true evil. He might be
able
to control the minds of the weak fools that surrounded him,
but even
>then it would be him controlling the dark power, not them. True

corruption, true conversion to evil did not come through control,
but
>through submission. He could offer Kodachi the power, but only she

could take it.
>
When Kodachi felt the massive well of power being offered to
her, she
>did not even stop to consider. This was all of the power she had
ever
dreamed of. This to the power to achieve anything and
everything that
>she had ever desired. With power like this at her disposal, she
would
never need to justify her actions again! Without a
backwards glance,
>Kodachi became the Black Rose; a servant of evil, minion of the
Wiseman.

>"Oh, yes!" The Black Rose cried in delicious ecstasy as wave after
wave
of power coursed through her body. Shaking from the
pleasure, her knees
>went weak and her eyes rolled back as pleasure more intense than any

orgasm washed through her. "Yes, Wiseman! I submit! I submit!
Ohhhh!"
>
Deep inside his cowl, the Wiseman turned a curious eye to his
latest
>disciple. That was not the usual reaction to unlimited power. Some

people wept, others crowed with glory. This was the first time he
had
>seen someone... well... someone do whatever the Black Rose was
doing.

>A minute later, as the statue of Kodachi and the begging Pig-Tailed

Girl crashed through the ceiling of the room, the Black Rose
managed a
>partial return to her senses. She still twitched slightly, and her

mouth was open as she gave small, shallow gasps for air. "Oh,
Wiseman...
>That felt sooo good. I can feel it. I can feel the power throughout
my
whole body. I can feel it _everywhere_... and it feels _so_
good. Let
>me use it! Please, Wiseman! Let me use it. I want to feel the power.
I
want to feel it rush through me again until... Ohhh... I want
to use it
>so much!"

>'Yes', the Wise man thought. 'The Black Rose was an excellent find.
It
is so rare in this day and age to find someone who honestly
covets
>power for its own sake. Everyone, Diamond, Black Lady, the Senshi;
they
desire power for what it can give them. This girl, the Black
Rose, she
>appreciates power and darkness for themselves. That alone shall make

her great.'

>
"Yes, my disciple. You can use all the power you desire. The more dark
>energy you bring into this world, the more that you can use. Feel it!
Feel the power inside the crystal. Feel how it can become a living,
>breathing entity! Feel how you can summon forth your own Droid to do

your bidding!"
>
The Black Rose could feel it. The initial wash of power had receded
>into a constant burn of pleasure in her womb and a tingling along her
limbs, but she could feel what the Wiseman described. There it was,
>housed within the statue, a new life, waiting for her command to come
forth and wreck her will upon the world. She was about to release her
>very first Droid when she hesitated and examined the statue more
closely. No... To release it the way the Wiseman had showed her was
>inelegant. For the Black Rose deserved a Droid no less perfect than she
was, a living machine of pure evil no longer bound to the source that
>created it. If she followed the Wiseman's directions, the Droid's death
would destroy her lovely statue, and that would never do.

>
"Come forth, my slave!" Pointing her hand at the massive statue of
>herself - already six metres tall and beginning to break through the
roof over the second floor - the Black Rose beckon her servant. Slowly,
>as though under duress, the crystal shimmered and moved. With steps
that were slow and halting at first but faster with each passing second,
>a Droid came from the statue. Fully grown, it was a good two and a half
metres tall, with its rounded head brushing the raised ceiling of the
>room.
>"I am impressed, my child." Indeed he was. The Wiseman had never even
considered it was possible to do what the Black Rose had just done. He
>already knew the woman would not have Black Lady's ability to directly
unleash the energy - the Black Rose would be lucky if she could match
>Emerald or Rubius in that regard - but her talent for deft manipulation
was extraordinary. Although he could not yet understand how she did it,
>the Wiseman already knew she had created a Droid without the inherent
weakness of its earlier brethren. Under the Black Rose's guidance, the
>one statue alone would be able to produce a constant stream of Droids
until the entire city was overrun!
>
Assuming of course she managed to control the convulsions of pleasure
>that had her lying on the floor thrashing. Perhaps she enjoyed her work
just a little too much.
>
The Black Rose was just getting her excitement under control and was
>trying to clamber back to her feet when a voice rang out through the
purple lit room.
>
"Hold! What form of devilry hast thou embarked upon this time, twisted

>sister of mine? Know now that I, Kuno Tatewaki, the Blue Thunder of

Tokyo, am sworn to defeat evil in all its forms!"

>
* * *

>
"You know, you've been even happier than usual today, Hotaru.
Something

>good happen today I don't know about?"

>They were coming home from their walk, and Hotaru had not stopped

smiling the entire time. Even when they had walked up the hill
and her

>breath came in short, sharp pants, she had been smiling. Simply the

fact that she had kept up the entire time and not needed to rest
was

>enough to make Hotaru smile normally, but today she had met
Ranma-san's
mother and invited her to dinner. That was even more
cause to smile,

>but since it was going to be a surprise, she did not want to tell
him
that.

>
Looking away from Ranma for a moment, Hotaru kept smiling as the

>entered the grounds of the Tendo home. "I'm just happy to be with
you,
Ranma-san. I know that if I keep this up, I'll really be
able to help

>you someday. And maybe, someday, I'll be able to help my Daddy
too."

>"That's the idea. Everyday you just get better than the one before.

Sooner than you know it, you be as fit and tough as the rest of
the

>girls here. 'Course you won't be as good as me, but hey, who
is?"

>Others - particularly short haired, short tempered tomboys - might
have
taken that as an insult and tried to beat him over the head
for it, but

>Hotaru simply looked up with adoration in her eyes. "I know I'll
never
be as good as you, Ranma-san, no-one is. But just you
watch! I'll make

>you proud and someday I'll be just as good as Shampoo-san or
Ukyo-san."

>Considering how far ahead his fiancees were already, Ranma thought
here
proposal was as likely as him ever giving up his manhood to
live as a

>girl permanently. He was preparing to say as much when the smell of

food wafted into the entryway were they were removing their dirty

>street shoes. Distracted by the thought of Kasumi's cooking, Ranma
was
fortunate enough to not make his comment, and forever crush
the hopes

>of the young girl.

>After a quick wash and clean up, Ranma and Hotaru followed their
noses
and arrived in the living room to join the rest of the
group as they

>sat down for a meal. Even with one space vacated around the table,

there was not enough room for everyone to sit next to the food
with so

>many martial artists there. Consequently Ryoga and Shampoo sat
beside
one of the doors, nursing large plates of food while the
rest of the

>people sat in reach of the dishes.

>When Hotaru sat down, Nabiki looked up from where she was wolfing
down
some rice. Normally she did not eat much at meals, but being
outside

>raising money all day made her hungry. Worse still, she normally had a
heavy diet of snack food to keep her going between classes or after
>school. Selling fake wards from morning to evening prevented the

snacking she was used to, and consequently she was as hungry as any of
>the fighters by the time evening came around.

>Watching the great piles of food disappear used to make her angry at

Ranma and his freeloading father, but now Nabiki took it as a sign of
>hope. People this hungry must have been training hard, and would have

the energy needed to fight evil again this night. The fact that it was
>her efforts that provided the money to put food on the table made the

meal taste even better. She could not fight, but she could contribute
>in other ways to eventually achieving the revenge her sister so

deserved.
>
"So, Hotaru-chan, did you have a good day?"
>
Looking up at Nabiki, Hotaru's eyes flicked to Ranma then back again.
>"I did, Nabiki-nee-chan. I went out this morning, and I've been looking

forwards to dinner ever since."
>
Nabiki gave her own brief smile. She knew what Hotaru had been up to,
>and the idea of having Ranma's mother around appealed. Perhaps Saotome-

san would be willing to help out Kasumi in the kitchen, or even provide
>a much needed womanly touch in the home. It might be mostly filled with

women, but Ukyo, Shampoo and female Ranma's obsession with fighting
>hardly seemed like the calm balance she remembered as a child with

their own mother around.
>
Nabiki was about to say something else when there was a knocking at the
>door. Rising from her seat, Kasumi moved to the door. "I'll get that."

No objection came from the others, most of whom were too busy eating to
>have heard anything.

>When Kasumi opened the door, she found a tall, serene woman standing

there. She wore a beautiful kimono patterned with flowers done in

>gentle colours against a white background. In her hands she bore a

small box - the sort you would get from a bakery or sweets store - and
>on her back was a long bundled item. The elegant woman gave a bow.

"Excuse me for interrupting. I am looking for Tomoe Hotaru. Is she
>available?"

>Kasumi smiled and stepped aside so that she could invite the woman in.

>"Yes, just a moment and I will get her for you."
>
Just then, the girl in question stepped past Kasumi and took one of the
>woman's hands. "Saotome-sama! You've come! I didn't tell Ranma-san you

were coming, because I wanted it to be a surprise. Please, come in!"
>We're having dinner, so there is plenty of food available."

>The woman stepped into the entrance way and removed her zori, the

traditional footwear that went with her kimono. Giving another

bow to

>Kasumi, she made the anxious Hotaru wait a few more moments by

presenting the box. "Good evening. Please take these as a gesture
of my

>appreciation for having me here. My name is Saotome Nodoka. I am

Ranma's mother."

>
"Oh my! Please, come in. You're most welcome here. Ranma-kun and

>Saotome-san are in the dining room."

>Giving a smile, Nodoka allowed Hotaru to pull her through the house.

Upon entering the dining room, Nodoka was astounded by the crowd
of

>people and weapons there. It seemed as though every second person
had
some sort of weapon sitting by them, and she could tell by
the way that

>they sat and watched her, most of the young people here were
martial
artists like her husband. Eyes roving the room, Nodoka
tried to

>recognise her son and husband. It should have been an easy task

considering the fact that there were only three men there, but
she did

>not succeed.

>There was a boy with long black hair. He might have been her son,
but
her son did not have bad eyesight, and this boy had on some
of the

>thickest glasses she had ever seen. Equally, the Chinese cast to his

features ruled him out. Across the room from him was a heavy set
boy.

>Nodoka would have been surprised if he was her son. The boy looked

rough and common, a burly brawler, not at all like the lean
powerhouse

>of a man that she had married.

>The last man in the room she recognised immediately. Tendo Soun had
not
changed greatly over the years, and still retained the same
air of calm,

>despite the fact that he was eating dinner next to a panda. In most

houses, having a panda present - let alone one holding a sign

>disclaiming "Hello complete stranger" would be cause for concern,
but
she remembered Soun as being an unflappable rock of a man,
solid and

>dependable in all situations. The decade or more since they had last

met obviously had not changed him one iota.

>
Looking down at the small back haired girl beside her, Nodoka
forced a

>smile to her face. "I'm sorry, Dear. Where is my son?"

>Hotaru blinked and pointed at the damp, red-haired girl glaring at
the
panda. "That's him."

>
Nodoka smiled indulgently, but with a trace of strain.

"Hotaru-chan,

>that's a girl. My son is a boy."

>Wide eyed, Hotaru looked at Ranma. "You mean you couldn't always
turn
into a girl, Ranma-san?"

>
"Huh?" The red-head said. Getting up, the short, buxom girl
walked over

>to where Hotaru was talking to the guest. "Didn't I ever tell you
how I
got cursed? Humph. Guess I didn't."

>
Turning so that she could look up at the tall lady with the
dark, wine-

>red hair, Ranma narrowed her eyes in concentration. "You know, you

look
real familiar. Do I know you?"

>
"Ranma-san!" Hotaru sounded scandalised. "This is your mother!"

>
"Huh? My mother?"

>
Nervously, as though she could not believe what she was seeing, Nodoka

>slowly reached out one hand. "R-Ranma-kun... Is that really you?"

>"M-Mum?"

>With a sudden yelp, Ranma gained much needed inches and masculinity. A
quick glance to his side showed Nabiki once again wearing the habitual

>smirk that she seemed to have lost since Akane's passing. "You can pay
me for the hot water some other time, Saotome."

>
Nodoka's eyes went as wide as dinner plates. In front of her very eyes,

>the short red-haired girl had changed into a boy. No. More than a boy,
a man. A man with hair as black as pitch, and eyes as blue as the sky.

>Where the girl had been short and cute, the man who replaced her was
her height and exuded a strength and confidence that could only come

>from true inner strength.

>"Ranma! It is you!" Most importantly, the man bore a face she would
never forget, that of her own son. Years had changed him from the

>cuddly little boy he had been when she last saw him, but there was no
mistaking the man who had grown from her own flesh.

>
Engulfed in a hug, Ranma felt a million memories stirring from where

>that had been hidden for many long years. The smell, the feeling, the
comfort that came from being held by the one person that could never be

>replaced in the world. When he spoke, it was almost a sob of joy,
almost a prayer of thanks. "Mum..."

>
Watching the joyous reunion, only one pair of eyes managed to remain

>dry. Even Mousse and Ryoga, once sworn enemies of Ranma felt an
unfamiliar stinging in their eyes followed by a blurring of sight and a

>tightness in their chest. Nabiki, once known for her cynical and icy
exterior found herself as moved by the experience as her sister. Kasumi

>- a secret aficionado of late night tear-jerker movies watched while
consuming bowls of ice cream - had tears streaming down her face as she

>hugged Nabiki and Hotaru. To see Ranma reunited with his mother after
such time, and to feel the love between the two of them was enough to

>move anyone.

>Quite literally, the sight of Ranma being hugged by Nodoka was enough
to move Genma. Moving as quietly as a panda can, the man drifted out

>the back of the room. 'Nodoka has seen the boy change.' Was the only
thought running through his teeny-tiny panda sized brain. 'Nodoka has

>seen the boy change.'

>In Genma's limited world view, there could only be one result of

such a
terrible action. While people cried over the reunion at the moment, he
>knew that all too soon they would be crying over Ranma's corpse. Ranma
was too honourable to run away from the seppuku pledge. When his mother
>revealed their pledge to commit suicide if the boy was not a 'manly
man', it would all be over. Ranma would stab himself in the belly, and
>No-chan would lop his head off. That would be the end of Ranma, and all
because of that rotten curse. 'Couldn't they boy have figured out why
>his father had not taken him home?'

>Just because Ranma was willing to lay down his life for honour, it did
not mean that Saotome Genma was. He admitted that the curse might have
>had something to do with his fault, but surely that did not mean he
needed to follow up his side of the pledge. Genma had done the best he
>could to raise the boy. What's more, he was needed here so that he
could train the others. Without him, how would they ever win against
>the forces of evil? Yes, it was much better that he sneak out now, then
return later - preferably once they had cleaned up after his son
>finished.

>Genma was most of the way to the wall of the Tendo compound when he
heard a voice call out behind him. "There he is, Mum. Pop got curse to
>become a panda the same time I was cursed to become a girl."

>Genma briefly held up a sign saying 'Traitor' then turned and ran for
the wall. He was scrambling up the side - quite a trick for a panda of
>his generous bulk - when Nodoka's voice rang out. "Saotome Genma... If
that is you, then stop now, or I will hunt you down like the beast you
>are!"

>The whole room went quiet at the sound of Nodoka's voice. Where it had
carried nothing but love for her long lost son, it now contained
>nothing but steel. Ten years of nothing but fear and dread put
authority into her voice that no training or martial arts could ever
>teach. When she spoke, the panda stopped, hesitated, thought about
going on, then turned back to face the music.
>
Nodoka took her arms from around Ranma, but she did not release him
>entirely. Holding tightly to one hand as though afraid she might
suddenly lose him again, the tall red-head walked out onto the porch at
>the back. The panda, her husband, had nervously walked back to the
house side of the Koi pond, and was nervously shuffling its feet.

>
"Ranma-kun... Son... I saw what that girl did to you earlier. Was that
>water that caused you to return to your true, manly form? If so, would
you be so kind as to have one of your pretty young lady friends provide
>some more? Although I have not seen you in so long, I have not seen my
husband in ten years either. Besides which, pandas have never

been

>known for giving clear explanations for their actions."

>Before Ranma could even open his mouth the eldest Tendo daughter walked
past her carrying a large yellow kettle. "Don't worry, Saotome-san. We

>always keep a good supply of hot water for Ranma and his father."

>As steam billowed up around the panda and a rotund man in a white Gi
was revealed, Nodoka's eyes widened. She was shocked even though she

>had seen it happen only a minute prior as a strange girl - almost the
splitting image of the little girl pictures Nodoka had once seen of her

>own mother - changed into her son. The man standing by the pond pushed
his bandanna back into perfect position on his head and gasped slightly.

>"Please, Kasumi. Not quite that hot."

>"Genma, Genma, Genma." Nodoka shook her head slowly back and forwards
as she walked towards him. So that her son would not need to follow her

>out into the lawn and dirty his feet, she released his hand, but he
still stayed nearby. When she stood in front of the man she had married

>eighteen years ago, Nodoka could hardly believe that the day had
finally arrived. The day she was finally reunited with the man she had

>loved more than life itself.

>SLAP!

>The sound of her palm on Genma's cheek rang like a gunshot in the quiet
neighbourhood. Reeling from the open-handed blow, Genma fell to a half-

>crouch looking up at her though the finger of one hand that gingerly
touched the stinging side of his face.

>
"Genma, how could you? So... So indescribably close to perfection, but

>you had to let something happen. How could you let my little boy get
cursed? You must have done a stupendous job raising him other than that.

>He is an almost perfect man, but you let this happen. How? How Genma?
How?"

>
The room was silent as everyone tried to understand what she was saying.

>She had only just met Ranma and she was saying what a wonderful parent
Genma must have been? Surely that could not be possible. She had never

>even seen Ranma fight - most people considered that his only strong
suit - and yet she thought he was perfect? Ranma had more rough edges

>than a crumpled piece of sandpaper. There were even days when Kasumi
had a hard time not saying something nasty about him, and that

>stretched the very realms of probability.

>"It... It was a training accident, No-chan... The boy and I were
training in China when it happened. There were no warnings!

Nothing! We

>were lucky to escape with our lives! Honestly! Why, we were lucky to
get away with just the curses! If I hadn't---"

>
"Dearest, you're babbling."

>
Genma shut his mouth with a snap. Whether his son knew it or

not, their

>lives still hung in the balance. "A... About the pledge, No-chan...

Do
you... That is, the curse..."

>
Nodoka's eyes widened and she placed herself protectively between Ranma

>and his father. "Dearest! Shame on you! How could you even say such a
thing?! The curse is a blemish, I can't deny that, but how could you,

>of all people, imply that our son is not manly? You raised him!"

>"Nonononono!" Genma spluttered denials like a machinegun. Despite his
wife's fervent defence of their son, he was still worried she might

>change her mind and decide that he was not a man among men. "He's a
man! He's a man! I just... wanted to hear your reasoning."

>
"My son, living in a house surrounded by beautiful women, goes out

>every night to fight the forces of darkness. My manly son, torn by the
loss of a girl he loved dearly, has raised an army of martial artists

>who are willing to fight by his side to destroy the legions who claimed
her life. What sort of a man would he have been if he did not, could

>not do that? What sort of man would he be if he turned his back on
Tokyo's plight and did not do everything in his power to return peace?

>
"Genma, Dearest, while I weep at the thought of my strong and handsome

>son being forced to wear the appearance of a fragile flower, that
doesn't change who he is. You have raised a son who is - by all

>accounts - the greatest martial artist of this generation. He is bold,
he is strong, he is handsome... usually, he is determined, he is loyal,

>he is courageous and he is surrounded by women who adore him, love him
and desire him. He inspires greatness in friends and strangers, and is

>feared by his enemies."

>Pulling the wrapped bundle off her back, she ditched the covers and
half bared the blade in one smooth movement. Holding the naked edge

>close to herself, she looked down at the still cowering man. "I would
sooner take this blade to my own heart than see him kneel before me in

>preparation. To see a son as manly as Ranma dead... It would be like
destroying every work of Michelangelo simply because David was not well

>enough endowed."

>Genma shook his head and stood up, holding out a tentative hand to
Nodoka. "Please, No-chan. You can put the sword away. I had intended to

>bring Ranma back to you soon but I was... Umm... I was just completing
his training. Yes! Completing his training. I knew he was a man among

>men the whole time! I just wanted him to be totally ready for you. Hee
Hee. Sure. That's it."

>
Wide eyed and as confused as everyone else in the room, Ranma could

>finally take it no more. "Would someone _please_ tell me what on

earth
is going on?! Mum! Old Man! Why do you keep talking like I'm not even
here."

Nodoka looked at him in confusion. "Because of the _oath_,
Ranma-kun."

"What oath?" His confusion was as evident on his faces as it was in his
voice.

When Nodoka looked at Genma he gave a lopsided smile and
shrugged. "I...

That is... I know! I thought it would be better if the boy just
learned
to live the right way, rather than studying for some sort
of test. Yes,

that's it exactly. He has to live it, just like the Art. Right,
No-
chan?"

As Nodoka nodded in solemn agreement, Ranma tried again. "_What_
oath?"

So she explained.

Before Nodoka had let Genma take their son on his long and
perilous

training journey, she had him swear an oath. If Genma did not raise
little Ranma to be a man among men, a living example of all the
manly

virtues, both he and Genma would commit ritual suicide. The idea was
Genma's but Nodoka made sure he was willing to live up to it.

Of course, Ranma was a very mature six year-old, so they had
also

gotten his agreement before they left. Under Genma's watchful eyes,
he
had placed his palm print on the contract, sealing his
agreement before

Genma had presented the document to Nodoka.

Nodoka had kept that prized document on the family shrine,
re-reading
it every day for the past ten years. Her son would be
magnificent,

Genma would assure that. However, if by some remote chance he
failed,
and Ranma was not a man among men, a paragon of all the
manly virtues,

she would be ready. For precisely one hour after reading the pledge
from her men, Nodoka would practice with her katana. She knew
only a

couple of basic kata and one special stroke, but after ten years of
practice, Nodoka could at least assure her men that she could
deliver

the coup-de-grace with precision and accuracy, if they were called
upon
to fulfil their honour.

By the time Nodoka had finished explaining all of this, both
Ranma and

Genma were nervously fingering their throats. When his mother had
extolled the manly virtues that had saved his life, Ranma had
become

even more nervous. If Akane had still been around and they had been
having their regular fights, he did not like his chances of
surviving

his mother's assessment. But then, that would mean Akane would still
be
alive, and he could not say that swapping his life for hers
would be a

bad trade.

Sensing the need for a distraction, Nabiki spoke up, changing the
topic
completely. "Has anyone seen Kuno-chan? It's completely
dark now, and I

>kind of thought we were waiting for him."

>The martial artists looked around, shrugging their shoulders. There had
been no sign of Kuno since yesterday when he went home after their
>patrol.

>* * *

>The magnificent Kuno Tatewaki blocked another attack by the hideous

underworld fiend that stood in front of him. Surely none other than
>himself would have been able to achieve what he could, to not only hold
of the Droid but to also defeat it. All single-handedly as further
>testament to his ability, since his demented sister was currently

cackling next to a small, seated man, both of who were watching him
>intently.

>Casually blocking another strike, the powerful Blue Thunder smirked at
the ease he had. Since his training on Watermelon Island, even that
>pond scum Saotome had not been able to defeat him with one of the fruit.
Now, of all things, a Droid was attacking him, patterned to appear
>almost identical to the melons he had trained against.

>With a large green body, and bulbous arms striped in black, the great
Kuno's twisted sister has summoned the least effective form to fight
>against him. While his stunning mind had long considered his sister to
be slightly eccentric - she was a Kuno after all, it would hardly do to
>state that she was completely insane - even someone as observant as he
had not realised that she had committed her soul to their enemies.
>While the Droid might not truly be a watermelon, its appearance was
close enough for his training to automatically take effect.

>
With stunning ease, every time a hand, arm or other body part of the
>Droid came within reach, the divine Kuno Tatewaki had severed the

offending item. The Droid's screams of pain had been a certain music to
>his ears. While Wagner or Bach was more appropriate to someone of his
regal stature, the cries of the suffering Droid were enough to ensure
>that he was sufficiently heralded in his noble quest to bring victory
over his sister and her dark actions.
>
All wise and understanding though he was, even someone of Kuno's
>immense knowledge was unable to discern how even someone as perverse as
his sister would be able to join with the forces of evil. For surely
>all those who would oppose the might of the benevolent Kuno Tatewaki

were evil by nature. Kuno was well aware that the people who made the
>Droids were the enemies of goodness and light, and almost assuredly

they were the dark forces that had enslaved his loves to the foul
>sorcerer that held their heart in his thrall.

>Yes, it was obvious that the evil mastermind Tuxedo Kamen had sent his
minion to ensnare Kuno's sister in an attempt to gain leverage over him.

>Only someone as evil and devious as the man in the black tuxedo would
think of something like that, and it spoke of the base treachery that
>was second nature to all his low kind. Simply looking at the servant of
Tuxedo Kamen that was sitting... err, floating... next to his sister,
>Kuno could tell what a despicable, shadowy fellow he was. True heroes
like the Blue Thunder had no need to hide their faces in shadow. That
>man must be evil.

>"Foul vermin! Selfish though she might be, Kodachi is still a Kuno, and
I, the Blue Thunder Of Tokyo will free her from your grasp!"

>
Moving deftly to the side with his normal grace and skill, Kuno evaded
>another strike while parrying two more. His bokken was a blur of

justice, delivering righteousness to everywhere within his reach, but
>he was still not able to reach through to his sister.

>Amidst an array of slashes and blocks that would leave most men in

knots and would be impossible for all but the most advanced swordsmen,
>Kuno watched as the cloaked figure spoke to his sister. Although she

was as dear to him as any other part of the Kuno estate, the generous
>Blue Thunder could only cope with short bursts of her laughter, so he

was quite glad when she finished. Regrettably, moments later, he wished
>she would continue laughing and never stop, for then she would be too

busy to take part in the despicable actions she did.

>
Obviously under some form of insidious mind control that changed her
>otherwise caring nature so that she no longer felt her normal sisterly

love and devotion for him, Kodachi reached out to the large pulsing
>crystal statue and waved her hand. After short period another Droid

stepped free, this one patterned dark brown, with short fur covering
>much of its body.

>Although he battled and held off the watermelon Droid with his

astounding dexterity and unsurpassed skill, the fearless Blue Thunder
>was slightly concerned at the presence of the second monstrosity. For

while everyone knew that to be a Kuno was to be great beyond all other
>- and he, Kuno Tatewaki was the crowning example of the centuries old

bloodline - there were limits for even his greatness. Why, if they were
>to summon another twenty or thirty of these things, he might even

become slightly pressed.
>
Most demeaning of all for Kodachi, was the way that the forces of
of
>darkness made her submit to them. After summoning the Droid, his

twisted sister had fallen to the ground, screaming and holding herself.
>Well did he recognise her antics, for Kuno had seen the expression of

indescribable pleasure on his previous suitors, back in the days when
>the noble Tendo Akane and the Pig-Tailed Girl had thrown themselves

at
him. While he had finally managed to convince the Pig-Tailed Girl that
>his true love lay with his darlings Venus and Fire, he could well

remember the way that his loves had fallen to the ground in
ecstasy at
>his mere appearance. To see such... devotion afflicted upon a Kuno
was
inexcusable.
>
"Foul demon! I shalt smite thee truly and free mine sister from
thy
>grasp!"

>Although the undefeatable and indefatigable Kuno's mastery of the
sword
saw him in good stead against the watermelon Droid, in some
way the
>other seemed to be able to slip through his guard. Evidently it was

using some other form of unnatural magic, for even the man who
had been
>his greatest enemy - Saotome Ranma - had never managed to hit him

without resorting to underhand techniques. His noble head ringing
from
>the pile-driver blow delivered by the Droid, Kuno looked up and
flashed
his most charismatic smile.
>
"That... Did not hurt."
>
* * *
>
As the ragtag group of martial artists arrived at the gates to
the Kuno
>residence, Hotaru spoke up. "Please wait, everyone. I think... I can

feel something evil in there."
>
While in her magical girl uniform, Hotaru possessed the ability
to
>sense evil. Normally it was not very useful, since you could usually

see the bad guys with your eyes just as well as she could sense
them,
>but maybe in this case she could help. It was better that Ranma-san
and
his friends went in with the knowledge that the place would
be
>dangerous, rather than expecting their friend's home to be perfectly

safe and normal.
>
"Are you sure you don't mean you can sense something _stupid_ in
there,
>Sugar?" Ukyo asked. Everyone gave a little snicker, which surprised
the
cook, since she was not sure that Shampoo laughed at anything
other
>than her enemies.

>"No, I'm serious. There's something really wrong. I can feel it.
It's--
--"
>
There was no telling exactly "it" was by Hotaru's definition,
because a
>massive grinding, crashing noise suddenly resounded from the house,
and
a dark, purple shape could be seen over one wing. As the
martial
>artists stood there and watched, the crystal shape grew revealing

itself to be a massive model of Kodachi's head. Accurate to every

>detail, the martial artists could almost feel the head leering at
them
in exactly the same way the gymnast always had.

>
"Looks like we found Hotaru's evil." Ranma said. Ryoga just
grunted in
>response, but he readied his trusty umbrella. Where there were giant

dark crystal statues, there were usually Droids and Senshi.

>
"No, it's not just that, there's also---"
>
"Sorry, Sugar. I don't think we have time for all the details at the
>moment. So, Ran-chan. How do you ant to do this? We all just go over

the fence then straight in through one of the windows?"

>
"We can't do that, Ucchan. This is the Kuno place we're talking about,
>and it's more whacked out than they are. I'm afraid this time it's just

gunna be me and Shampoo. We both went in there when we were looking for
>the Japanese Nanniichuan, so we know what we gotta suspect, which is

just about everything."
>
"What about me, Saotome?" Ryoga held up one fist, as though daring the
>small redhead to forget. "You weren't really thinking of going in there

without me, were you? You weren't the only one after the Nannichuan,
>you know."

>"Trust me, Ryoga, I'd love to have you along, but I got two good

reasons for you. One: Midorigame. How's P-Chan gunna fare if one of
>Kodachi's traps drops you into the pond with her pet alligator?"

>Ryoga gave a low growl, as though trying to fight off the logic behind

the argument. "And what else?"
>
"Senshi. With that thing sticking out the top of the house, you can bet
>every psycho in Tokyo is gunna be coming through here in no time. I

need you, Ucchan, Mousse and Hotaru to hold them off till we can get
>Kuno out. I don't care who destroys the statue, but I don't want anyone

else dying because of them. You've gotta buy me some time."
>
Those staying behind nodded their head solemnly. They all too well
>realised that depending on who turned up, they might be stuck with the

hardest end of the deal. Fortunately, since Ryoga was concentrating on
>the image of beating up the red-skirted Senshi while he was immune to

her fire, he completely missed Ranma's muttered comment about how Ryoga
>would also be more of a liability if he got lost in there.

>Catching the eyes of each person on the team, Ranma waited for their

nod of approval. He might have been the one that blurted out the plan,
>but without their support, it would not achieve anything.

>"Be careful, Ranma-san."

>"Yeah, Ran-chan. Make sure you come back in one piece."

>Giving the girls a cocky grin that inadvertently irritated the boys no

end, Ranma nodded. "Come on, Shampoo. We gotta go save stick boy's
>butt."

>Shampoo nodded and tightened her grip on the bonbori as she vaulted to

the top of the gate. The main driveway was the easiest way into the

>Kuno residence since they needed to leave it clear of ambushes for

delivery vehicles. Unfortunately, it also sent them straight to
main
>entrance, which was as almost as far from their desired destination
as
possible, and you could be assured that every centimetre of
the way
>would be covered in traps.

>Access was no problem, Shampoo was a past master of creating doors

wherever they were needed. Once in the house, they skirted the
obvious
>traps and made their way into the inner sanctum. The razor wire and

bowling balls suspended from the ceiling were amateur grade
traps,
>hardly worthy of the Kuno's efforts, but they did act as a warning
for
the rest of the house. This would not be easy.
>
From the main ballroom in the middle of the mansion, Ranma and
Shampoo
>sprinted through the darkened corridors with an increasing feeling
of
dread. They had already been in here for several long minutes,
and
>while they had not been hurt seriously, both of them sported some
minor
cuts and bruises. Even worse, they had only just missed
being dumped
>into one of the hidden pits or labyrinths beneath the house twice.

While the fall would not be enough to injure them, they knew from

>experience that it was the under levels that contained the really
nasty
tricks. If they fell down there, it would slow them
dramatically, and
>they might not be able to reach Kuno and his sister in the time
their
friends were able to hold off any aggressors that turned
up.
>
By Ranma's reckoning, they had almost reached the place where
they had
>seen the statue erupting from the roof when an unfortunate misstep

triggered another trap. As sharp as one of Dr Tofu's acupuncture

>needles, a stream of darts jetted out from the wall immediately in

front of Ranma. Moving more on instinct than planning, Ranma
dropped to
>her left side at the same time as her right hand knocked up the
first
dart in the steam, deflecting it from her face.
>
Safe herself, Ranma rolled back to her feet - carefully avoiding
the
>trigger step - while she looked back at Shampoo. "Are you, OK? Did
they
get you?"
>
"Shampoo fine. Shampoo barely scratched." Leaning closer,
Shampoo
>pulled up the sleeve of her top and showed him the thin red line
that
ran across her pale flesh. As she had said, there was
nothing to worry
>about. Nonetheless, Shampoo took another step closer. "Ranma check
for
other marks on Shampoo, yes?"
>
"Not now, Shampoo. We've got to get the Kuno's outta here."

>
She was half turned back to the door from the room when Shampoo
almost
>threw herself into Ranma's arms. "Shampoo!" She said with a
noticeable
trace of anger in her voice. "I told you we don't have
time for that

>now."

>But Shampoo did not move, nor did she apologise or speak in any way.

Putting an arm around her slim waist, Ranma rolled her backwards into
>what was almost the classical pose for a dancer holding his partner.

Except in dace, the person holding is usually a man, and he is usually
>taller than his partner. Currently both Ranma and Shampoo were female,
and Ranma's small statue meant that Shampoo's head lolled backwards
>without decent support and the red-head had to struggle to keep a

decent grip on the girl as she tried to inspect her.
>
"Hey! Shampoo! Come on, wake up!" Giving a shake seemed to evoke no
>response, so Ranma laid her down and looked into her eyes. The Chinese
girl's eyes, normally so bright and vibrant were clouded and still.
>
"Poison." The word came out as a curse. Of all the nasty tricks that
>the Kuno's like to employ, Ranma liked Kodachi's predilection for

poison the least. Traps and weapons you could fight back against, but
>poison was insidious and as dangerous as a snake in the grass. You

might never know it was there until it struck you down, and it could be
>every bit as deadly as any weapon a martial artist might ever field,

all with a single drop.
>
Frowning in annoyance, Ranma stood up and evaluated her options. She
>could go and get Kuno, and rely upon being able to come back for

Shampoo. That might work all right if there was not much danger, but
>Ranma did not like her chances. In the past, statues like the one they
saw rising from the roof were often guarded by a Droid. By herself, or
>even with Kuno's assistance, Ranma did not like her chances of being

able to defeat the Droid. She might do it, but the effort of getting
>Shampoo out of the house in a big hurry after it would not be good. Nor
would her prospects of being able to help her friends with the Senshi
>that would inevitably arrive.

>Sighing in resignation, Ranma slid her hands under Shampoo and hoisted
the Amazon to her shoulders. She knew that Shampoo would have done
>almost anything to have her be carried around like this if she was

awake, so the only reason Ranma was doing it now was because her friend
>was unconscious. The fireman's carry was effective and easy to maintain,
but Ranma suspected Shampoo would enjoy the position just a little too
>much if she woke up. Resolving to move Shampoo to her arms the first

time her purple head moved, Ranma set off at a run again. Only a few
>more rooms to go.

>Ranma heard sounds of fighting well before she could see them. It was
only when she rounded the corner of a slightly broken looking wall that
>she was able to take in the battle. In all honesty, even as she stood
there, the greatest martial artist in Japan, Ranma had to

admit she was
>impressed by Kuno's skill and stamina.

>The Kendoist was standing with his back to Ranma when she entered, but
she could see how worn he was. His clothes hung in tatters around him,
>and she could see a wide array of large bruises and cuts covering his
back and sides. Scattered around him were a number of broken bokken,
>each one testament to a powerful blow that had reached through, or a
block that had succeeded in abating the impact of an otherwise massive
>strike.

>While she could not credit his skill as being near hers, Ranma did have
to give Kuno full points for persistence. Alone he was facing off
>against three Droids, each one uglier than the last. While he swayed on
his feet and struggled to keep his weapon pointed at the nearest enemy,
>he still commanded respect. Few people would remain in the same room as
that force of evil, let alone have the audacity to take it on.

>
Hoping the Droids did not see her, Ranma quietly put Shampoo on the
>ground. It was worse than she had thought, and she had considered some
pretty bad things. There were not Witches here, and neither Emerald nor
>Diamond was there to command the Droids, but looking at the way Kodachi
stood there beside a shadowy figure, Ranma could only conclude that her
>pristine, uninjured state only meant some form of collusion.

>"Halt... Foul fiends... Release my... Release my sister... and the
great Kuno... Blue Thunder Of Tokyo... may yet have mercy on you."

>There was more puffing and panting in Kuno speech than talking, but he
still said it with the same confident belief he always maintained.

>
Dodging behind a pillar, Ranma ghosted closer to the action in time to

>hear Kodachi's response. "Brother dear. I'm afraid that there is
absolutely no-one to release me, nor anything to release me from. This

>most kind and generous admirer of mine has seen free to gift me with
powers beyond the comprehension of your pitiful mind."

>
"Lies! A member of House Kuno would never lower themselves to scrapping

>in the gutters like those common miscreants do."

>The Black Rose studied her fingernails for a moment, as though seeking
a fitting response to that. "Do you know, Brother Dearest, I find

>myself growing more and more tired of your delusional ways. Since you
cannot seem to accept what is evident before you, and you continue to

>refuse my offers, I am afraid that I have no choice. Consider this my
way of making you first among equals, a last parting gift from me...

>Droids! Kill him!"

>So saying, Kodachi took the hand of the man sitting next to her, and
the next instant they were gone. Briefly they seemed to flicker,

as

>though the reception was bad on an old television, but all too soon

Kuno was alone, facing three large, angry Droids; but then, do
Droids

>come in any other type aside from large and angry?

>That was all Ranma needed. Running on legs boosted by Ki and body

churning with as much heavy Ki as she could generate, Ranma
sprinted

>forwards. For a brief moment, even the Droids seemed to move in slow

motion as she grabbed what remained of the back of Kuno's shirt
and

>turned around. Fortunately the heavy fabric along the collar had

survived the punishment it had received in Kuno's fights, and he
was

>dragged along as his saviour pulled him away from the Droids.

>Stunned beyond belief, Kuno looked over his shoulder to see a
familiar
red pigtail bobbing in the air. "Pig-Tailed Girl! You
came for me!

>Surely there can be no greater sign of your love!"

>Unceremoniously dropping him, Ranma spared a moment from her

contemplations. "Pick on the Senshi, not me, Kuno. They deserve
it."

>
Holding her hands in front of her, Ranma dropped all the heavy
Ki she

>had gathered into a green ball. "Shi Shi Hokodan!"

>Ripping across the room in a flash of lurid light, the green ball

struck the wall and blasted it open. "Instant door. Follow me,
Stupid."

>
Hoisting Shampoo over her right shoulder like a sack of wheat,
Ranma

>grabbed Kuno's hand and pulled him behind her. Although he still
wanted
to stay and fight, most of that urge had gone out of him.
Content to

>follow, Kuno soon found himself out in a hallway. It ran in parallel
to
the room they had just been in, and was just as filled with
traps as

>the rest of the house.

>A push from behind, and Kuno found himself leading the party down
the
hall. "Come on, Kuno. We gotta get out of her. Those Droids
will be

>after us soon, and neither you or Shampoo can fight them real well
at
the moment."

>
"Umm... Yes. I understand." Firming his resolve, Kuno looked
left then

>right. He had lived in this house all his life and knew every
corridor
like the back of his hand. At the Pig-Tailed Girl's
behest, he set off

>at the best speed he could manage. Now that he was no longer facing

danger, Kuno could feel pain creeping into his limbs and body.

All over

>he hurt, and his legs screamed out for him to stop and rest, but he

kept on moving. Deep down, some well hidden part of his
personality

>called for self preservation, so he ran, putting as much of the trap

infested house between them and the Droids as possible.

>
"These traps... They'll slow them for a little while, but not
forever,

>Pig-Tailed Girl. We have to get out of here, lest my deranged and

traitorous sister decides she is serious in her intent."

>
"Fine. Just head for the main gate. Everyone else is waiting
there.

>Once we're together, then we can look at doing something about those

ugly suckers."

>
Kuno nodded and pressed just a little harder. Maybe it was his

>imagination, but the angry sounds of pursuing Droids did not sound
far
off.

>
* * *

>
Only a couple of minutes had passed since Ranma and Shampoo had
gone

>into the Kuno estate, but already those who remained outside were

getting twitchy and nervous. While they remained on guard and
waited

>for some - any - sign from inside, their nerves wore down and
seconds
seemed to pass like hours.

>
"Shouldn't they be back yet?"

>
"That's the fifth time you've asked that already, Ukyo." Ryoga
sounded

>annoyed, but he could not blame her for asking.

>"But how long have they been gone? It's got to be at least half an
hour.
That's far to long for them to get in and out. I think we
need to go

>after them."

>"It's only been two and a half minutes, Ukyo. That's exactly twenty

five seconds since you last asked exactly the same thing." Mousse

>sounded calmer than Ryoga, but not much.

>"Oh, and how do you know?"

>Mousse lifted up his arm and dropped a full sized grandfather clock

onto the street. His response was dry, but it was clearly an
attempt to

>relieve the stress. "Timing is very important to Hidden Weapon Style

of martial arts."

>
Ukyo groaned though she took his point. Trying to calm down, she
began

>to pace backwards and forwards. She was Ranma's fiancée. She was not

supposed to stand by on the sidelines and worry about him like
this.

>She was supposed to be with him, facing the same dangers he did,
saving
him from terrible fates and so on.

>
"Shouldn't they be back yet?"

>
Before Mousse could retort, Ryoga held up his hand and nodded at
a dark

>alleyway across the street. "Wait! Did anyone else just see
anything?"

>When the chorus of 'no''s came, Ryoga shook his head and started in
the
direction of the alley. "Wait here while I check it out. And
this time,

>try to keep your eyes open. I don't want to know what would happen
to
us if the Senshi caught us out."

>
Abashed, Hotaru, Mousse and Ukyo watched Ryoga's broad back as
he

>slowly and carefully advanced towards the alley. Just as he was

entering the darkness, Ukyo looked over Hotaru's head and spoke
to the

>Chinese boy. "Sugar... I was just wondering... Shouldn't one of us

go
with him, you know, just in case he gets lost or something?"

>
"What sort of person could get lost walking down an alley?"

>
The teenagers blinked simultaneously then turned and sprinted to the

>alley. "Ryoga! Wait for us!"

>As they skidded around the entrance to the alley with Hotaru on their
heels, they got their answer. Ryoga was a person who could get lost

>anywhere. There was no trace of him, nor anything else that could have
piqued his interest.

>
"Damn!" Mousse folded his arms in irritation and frowned. "Now we've

>got problems. Ryoga probably won't be able to find his way back for
days."

>
Just down past the corner of a cross street to the alley, Ryoga lifted

>his head. "Huh? Did someone just say my name?"

>Looking backwards and forwards for the source of the voice, Ryoga
realised that he had become distracted and lost track of which alley he

>had come out of. He had been concentrating so hard, making sure that he
knew exactly where to go so he could get back to the others, and it was

>all thrown out the window because he thought he heard someone speaking
to him.

>
Taking a guess on the best direction to follow, Ryoga crossed the road

>and hoped he was heading back to the Kuno mansion. It did not take long
for him to become worried that something was amiss, since he was fairly

>sure - not certain by any measure, but fairly sure nonetheless - that
it had not taken him half an hour to walk to the alley from where he

>had been standing guard.

>Shrugging his wide shoulders, Ryoga continued, there was not much else
he could do. Life had taught him that no-one would find him; he needed

>to find his destination, no matter how long that took. He was passing
another narrow street when he heard familiar voices. Turning left into

>the street instantly, Ryoga started a slow jog with his head swivelling
backwards and forwards. None too soon, Ryoga breached the end of the

>street and came out onto a main road. A road nearly devoid of people,
but yet containing two too many.

>
Looking around once more, Ryoga fervently hoped that his friends were

>near enough to hear the battle, because he did not like his chances.
Just him and Black Lady, and with her delicate figure he did not think

>she would do very well in combat, despite what she had said last time
they met. Giving one last growl of anger, Ryoga cupped his hands in

>front and took aim. "Shi Shi Hokodan!"

>Green, furious energy surged across the street and knocked the
despicable Sailor Neptune off her feet. Now that he had announced

>himself, Ryoga started forwards. Against a pair of Senshi, he did

not
think he would be able to win in a ranged battle. Then again, it was
>those very thoughts - and the sight of Neptune regaining her feet

apparently unhurt - that fuelled his depression. "Shi Shi Hokodan!"
>
Watching the aqua Senshi fall onto her bottom again, Ryoga snorted. If
>she could keep getting up from his best attack, Ryoga knew he would

soon reach levels of depression great enough to boost his attack even
>further until she did notice it. In many ways, the Shi Shi Hokodan was

the perfect attack. If you won, you were happy, but then you did not
>need it anymore. If you lost, you would become more depressed, drawing

upon more and more power until at last your attack was overwhelming.
>
Ryoga might have continued to pound Sailor Neptune quite successfully,
>but her partner was not very keen on that idea, and she was entirely

willing to ignore Black Lady for long enough to distract the rude

>person who had cut in on their dance. Having kept half an eye on the

tall Senshi, Ryoga was able to dodge the World Shaking as it burrowed
>through the top of the street. Leaping to the side he suffered nothing

more than minor stings as yellow energy sparked off the travelling ball
>of destruction. Regrettably, the building behind him was not able to

dodge as well. As he touched down from his jump the façade gave an
>ominous groan and began to swing inwards. Moments later the lost boy

was buried completely in rubble.
>
"No!" Dimly in the darkness under the collapsed building front Ryoga
>could hear his friend shouting. Well, Ryoga assumed Black Lady was his

friend. She was fighting the Senshi and he had seen her fight the Death
>Busters before. The old adage of "The enemy of my enemy is my friend"

was always a good starting point. The bricks managed to dampen some of
>the sound, but there was no doubting that the fighting had just become

more intense.
>
Black Lady was out there fighting, and he was trapped under here.
>Straining his shoulders, Ryoga could feel the bricks shift, but not

much. Gritting his teeth, he tried again to no avail. Around him, he
>could start to make out the shapes of the rubble covering him. Dim

green provided limited lighting, but that just made everything seem
>more and more hopeless. If he could not lift it off him, those Senshi

would take apart Black Lady, and it would be all his fault.
>
The lighting was brighter now, bright enough to read by. Inspiration
>struck at the same time as he heard consecutive attacks called out

above him. "Bakusai Tenketsu!"
>
Rock exploded around him, sending fragments everywhere. As the dust
>began clearing, Ryoga stood there with heart pounding and looking

like
>a green search light in the mist. Depression and uselessness washed
>through his body as though he was made of it. It pulsed through his

veins and he could feel it curling the hairs on his arms. He knew
Ranma
>would never suffer depression one tenth as great as this, everything

just went perfectly for the annoying sex changer; that made it
even
>more depressing.

>"SHI SHI HOKODAN!" Rather than a Roaring Lion Bullet racing from his

hands, this was more like a Roaring Lion Artillery Shell. Large,
nasty
>and packed with every last erg of energy in his body, the attack
would
have been noticed even by someone as tough as the Senshi.
Would have,
>if it hit. When launching his all or nothing attack, Ryoga
momentarily
forgot that while the Senshi were as tough as he was,
they were also as
>fast as Ranma.

>A surprised Sailor Uranus looked across from her to where she had
been
standing, directly behind there the shop had been completely
gutted by
>the one blast. "Careful, Neptune! That can't have been what he was

firing before, it's much more powerful. I think he must have just

>powered up some how."

>"Right!"

>"WORLD SHAKING!"

>Exhausted, Ryoga looked up to see another attack rolling in towards
him.
He was too tired to move, but if he stayed here, they would
be picking
>little bits of him off the walls. An instant before the yellow
energy
overcame him, Ryoga felt himself lifted by the back of his
shirt,
>soaring out of the danger zone.

>First he looked down, and saw that he was really only a few metres
up,
despite how it felt. When he looked upwards, he saw a smile
on that
>angelic face. "Black Lady..." He whispered.

>Moving across the street now, she looked down at him.
"Ryoga-san."

>His mouth fell open. "You... You remembered my name!"

>"How could I forget the name of the only man to ever come to my
defence.
The only man to try and save me or show me any kindness.
And now look,
>you've done it again, and those horrible, horrible Senshi have tried
to
hurt you."
>
For a moment a look of royal displeasure crossed Dark Lady's
face and
>Ryoga resolved himself never to make her angry with him. She still

seemed like a fragile flower to him, ill-suited to fighting
despite the
>fact that she was carrying his not inconsiderable bulk through
mid-air
without any apparent difficulty. He did not know what she
had planned
>for the Senshi but he knew he would enjoy it much more than they
would.

>Loving him, she placed him beside a massive leg made out of purple

crystal. "Rest here, Ryoga-san. I have something to take care
of."

>
Resting his back up against the stone, he watched Black Lady take to
>the air again, artfully dodging a stream of water that shot from

Neptune's hands. Once she was high over the field of battle and could
>direct her attacks against the Senshi with ease the pink haired woman

ceased her assent and looked down. Licking her luscious lips once, she
>lifted her right hand and held it above her head.

>"I think it is time the Outer Senshi learned to respect the power of

Nemesis!" With that, she dropped her hand and a beam of black energy
>coursed out of it. Looking like a stream of black paint, the attack

flew straight and true, hitting the ground between the two earth bound
>girls.

>Street and dirt exploded everywhere sending the two girls flying. The

crater was enormous, at least ten metres across, and the debris
>shattered what few windows remained intact in nearby buildings. Rather

than let the Senshi off with just a warning, Black Lady brought her
>other hand down and began firing bolt after bolt of blackness at where

Sailor Neptune would have landed. More explosions ensued and the
>remaining street and sidewalk was ripped into ruin.

>Smirking to Ryoga, Black Lady dropped back to the ground and started to

walk over to where her victim should be. "See, Ryoga-kun. There was no
>real danger. I can call you 'Ryoga-kun', can't I?"

>Slightly nervous, Ryoga nodded. If she could blow things up like that

and fly around, she could call him whatever she felt like and he would
>not object. He was still nodding when he saw two figures appear out of

the dust. Eyes widening he tried to shout a warning even as Uranus'
>blast caught Black Lady in her stomach.

>"No!" Suddenly boosted by adrenaline, Ryoga stood up in a fit of rage,

only to collapse back again almost immediately as his exhaustion hit.
>Reaching back with one hand, Ryoga braced himself on the leg of the

statue, trying to steady himself enough to gain his breath.

>
Before Black Lady even hit the ground Ryoga felt energy surging into
>his body. Darkness, depression, anger, all this flowed into him from

the statue. All the heavy energy he had used in his Shi Shi Hokodan
>came rushing back into him, filling him up again so he could continue

the fight. Sparing an amazed glance for the statue, Ryoga turned back
>to the Senshi with a feral grin on his face, fangs showing as he felt

eager for battle.
>
"You're not going to hurt Black Lady like you did to Akane!"
With one
>hand on the statue and one in front of him, his depression blasts came

as fast and easily as if he was squirting a water pistol. Unlike a
>water pistol, they did much more damage when they hit. They might not

have been as powerful as his last attempt had been, but his

ability to

>throw an unlimited quantity made even the Senshi take him seriously as a target.

>
With green blasts flying towards the Senshi like arrows at a target,

>they quickly separated and forced him to divide his fire. He did not have to divide it for long however, since Black Lady was back on her

>feet sooner than he would have believed possible. Brows pulled down into a terrifying scowl, Black Lady brushed off some dust from her

>dress. "That made me dirty! You'll pay for that!"

>Hopping into the air, Black Lady stood there with one leg curled beneath her for a moment before sighting on Sailor Uranus, the woman

>who had the audacity to strike her and send her into the dust and wreckage. Unleashing a massive quantity of energy, Black Lady

>systematically set about destroying everything around the Senshi, scouring the earth to get her prey. Buildings erupted and dirt flew

>everywhere, but she had only just begun to tap her power. Granted full access to the powers of Nemesis by the Wiseman, Black Lady knew she

>could rip this entire district into nothingness if she desired, but that would not accomplish her mission, nor would it allow her to save

>Ryoga.

>With Black Lady focused on destroying Sailor Uranus, Ryoga switched his fire back to Sailor Neptune. Able to concentrate on the one Senshi, he

>could keep her on the run long enough that she found it almost impossible to return fire. Unfortunately, the difference between

>"almost impossible" and "impossible" can be very large. Forced to keep his hand on the statue so that he could draw on its power, Ryoga was

>unable to dodge.

>When Sailor Neptune's attack hit him, Ryoga was forced backwards, thrown through the crystal. For a moment, his whole world became

>nothing but pain and the vision of shattered black shards of crystal. All around him his pained face reflected back in a million and one

>facets. Almost in slow motion, Ryoga felt himself land on the ground, his back scratched by a multitude of pieces. Above him, he watched the

>bulk of the statue slowly fall towards him, jagged edges seeking out his heart as they descended.

>
Closing his eyes, Ryoga braced himself, preying that it would be quick

>and that Black Lady would be able to deal with the Senshi by herself. Holding himself rigid, Ryoga held his breath, the breath he expected to

>be his last. Instead, a warm breeze washed across his face and he felt a fine shower of dust.

>
Cranking one eyelid open, Ryoga looked up and tried to understand what

>had happened. The statue was gone. All of those horrible, piercing shard were gone. All that existed was himself... and Black Lady.

"Y-You
>saved me."

>Black Lady blushed slightly, a fine red showing up easily on her
pale
features. "You would have done the same for me."

>
Numbly, Ryoga nodded. Here she was, right next to him, and he
could not
>think of what to say. She probably the most beautiful woman he had
ever
seen, and she was spending time with him. It was more that
his brain
>could cope with. Although Akane was beautiful, although so many of

Ranma's fiancées had been stunning, Black Lady cast them all into
>shadow. She was tall, slender, refined, and her giggle was like the

sounds of birds in the spring morning.
>
"I... I'm sorry. I must have been staring."
>
Reaching down, she helped him to his feet. Her hand was tiny,
but there
>was no doubting the strength it held. "Please. I am the one who must

apologise. If I was not distracted with those Senshi, you would
not
>have become involved. Please, Ryoga-kun, accept my apology... And my

thanks."
>
Looking down, Ryoga scratched the back of his unruly hair and
gave a
>short laugh. "Hee Hee. I couldn't just let them attack you like
that.
The Senshi are everyone's enemies, not just yours. Heck...
I would have
>helped you no matter who you were fighting."

>"Oh my!"

>Rather than the confident and slightly brazen girl he had seen in

battle, Black Lady up close seemed to be just as shy as he was.

>Nervously shuffling his feet, Ryoga kicked aside some of the dust
that
had gathered. For a moment, a nervous thought began to take
root in his
>mind. "S-Say... This statue... You wouldn't be using it to produce

Droids or Daimons or anything, would you?"
>
He was rewarded by that perfect laugh again. "Of course not,
Ryoga-kun.
>As you saw, the statue is nothing but a fuelling site for the dark

energy. I have no need of creating something as feeble as a Droid
to do
>my work for me."

>Relieved, Ryoga gave his own little chuckle. Over the last few weeks

they had learned to associate the giant statues with the presence
of
>Droids and Emerald or Diamond who controlled them. As he had hoped,

Black Lady confirmed that she was not a party to those sorts of
deeds.
>It was the people that made the monsters that were just as much to

blame for Akane's death as the Senshi, and he was glad that his
friend
>was not affiliated with that.

>Surprising him with her action, Black Lady took Ryoga's hand and
lead
him away from the scene of their battle. "I'm not sure
whether I
>managed to get Sailor Uranus or not, but Sailor Neptune is still out

there. Come, walk with me for a time. It would probably be better
for

>both of us if we were to depart prior to the return of the
police."

>Nodding his head, Ryoga held her slender fingers in his wide, blunt

ones and walked beside her. His face felt like it was burning
from
>embarrassment, and his heart was pounding harder than when he was

fighting, but he would not have traded their evening together for

>anything.

>* * *

>"Shampoo!"

>Mousse's eyesight might not be the best even with his Coke bottle
eye
glasses, but even he could see well enough while wearing them
to
>recognise the shape coming towards them. In a rather lopsided
looking
arrangement, the small, female Ranma was the centrepiece
with his love
>Shampoo thrown over one shoulder so that her feet almost touched the

ground and her long hair collected the occasional burr or stick
from
>the grass. On Ranma's left, the tall Kuno heir was draped languidly.

Since Ranma would normally not let the boy touch her, Mousse
instantly
>knew that something was wrong.

>"Shampoo!" Calling the name like a battle cry, Mousse vaunted the
front
gates and sprinted to Ranma as she crossed the front lawn.
Reaching
>them partway, Mousse took Shampoo into his arms and gently cradled
the
unconscious girl. "What happened? Shampoo! Answer me!"

>
"She'll be fine, Mousse. One of the traps got her, but it's only
a
>sleeping poison. Kuno says she'll be fine."

>The Chinese boy paid him no mind, running off with Shampoo in his
hands.
Pulling the stumbling Kuno with him, Ranma could not keep
up, and
>Mousse returned to the safe side of the gate just as Ukyo was
crossing
in the opposite direction to help Ranma. Between the two
of them, the
>teenagers got Kuno out of his own home and sat him on the
street.

>"Where's Ryoga?" Ranma asked, casting about for the second strongest

fighter.
>
"Lost." There was scorn mixed with regret and shame in Ukyo's
voice.
>
Cursing softly, Ranma turned back to the gates and looked
inwards.
>Mousse would be almost useless since he was so worried about
Shampoo.
With Ryoga missing and Kuno injured that left himself
and Ukyo as the
>only able bodied fighters remaining. Against one Droid, he would
have
chanced it. Against three...
>
Ranma turned back to his friends and crouched down in front of
the
>kendoist. He was looking better now that Hotaru was using her
healing
on him, but she seemed to be getting paler and paler by
the second.
>"Hey, Hotaru. Are you OK? You don't look so good."

>"I'll be fine, Ranma-san. I just need to keep healing
Tatewaki-san."

>Smiling a little weakly, Kuno held up a hand to stop her. "Nay, I say
to thee, fair nurse. While thy ministrations are most appreciated, my
>wounds vex me insufficiently to encumber thee so. Better that I should
face the minions of all nine hells as they do come from mine abode than
>I should take my repose under your tender care."

>Hotaru blinked a couple of times. "Does that mean you want me to stop?"

>"Verily."

>With a sigh, and not entirely unwillingly, Hotaru sat back on her heels
and ran a forearm across her brow. Even as a magical girl, healing
>people took a lot out of her. Since she had been with Ranma-san and his
friends, she had gotten lots of practice every night and she was
>getting better, but this time there were so many injuries to treat, it
was very taxing. She was not sure why they were different, but one of
>the things she loved about Ranma-san and all his friends was that they
liked her even more for her ability to heal, rather than scorning her
>like the other children at school. It was a nice feeling.

>Kuno forced himself back to his feet and unsteadily walked his way back
to the gates of his mansion. "After all these years, the hounds of hell
>fairly bark at the doors. Sheltering within the home created to defend
us from such peril they do bark and bay, slavering at the thought of
>our souls."

>Leaning forwards, Kuno pressed his head against the bars, unseen tears
tracking down his face. "Fully eight years before, this house became
>nothing more than a source of sorrow. Would that I could pull it all
down, to bring it to the ground rather than to fester with such unholy
>creatures residing within."

>There was quiet for a while, then a soft voice came from beside his
elbow. "Do... Do you really mean that, Tatewaki-san? Would you really
>blow up your whole home rather than let the Droid's survive?"

>He gave a rueful chuckle. "Were only that possible, I would hesitate
for not even a second. This house did cease to be a home since the
>madness came that night. To the Kuno fortune, such a house as this is
nothing, and there would be no loss of loving memories within its walls,
>for all those were cleaned away in one night. Aye, I say that if I were
to have the means, I would clear this ground, brick by brick, till
>naught remained of house or Droid."

>"I... I could do it... If you really wanted..."

>Suddenly, alarmingly, Hotaru felt she was the centre of attention.
Blushing, she lowered her head and held the Silence Glaive across her
>body in an unconsciously defensive gesture.

>Looking down at her, Kuno spoke slowly. "Fair maiden, little soldier of
the way of justice, tell you the truth? Could you bestow this

boon upon
>my line?"

>"Well... I would be a bit difficult..." Hotaru could feel everyone

relax, as though they had caught her boasting. "But I think I can
make
>the attack small enough."

>That caused everyone to stop and take stock. As one, all the heads

present turned and looked at the mansion. Large by the standards
of any
>house, it was enormous for Tokyo proportions. Even more, it sat in
the
middle of a private garden that was closer to a forest or a
park. To
>say it was large did not do justice to the Kuno's wealth or the
massive
efforts from their staff of maids and grounds keepers.

>
"You'll have a problem making it small enough?" For once even
Ranma
>sounded impressed.

>The words were hardly out of his mouth when Kuno showed he was as
good
as his words. Not waiting a second longer, he knelt down in
front of
>Hotaru and took one of her hands. "Little soldier, I implore you.

Please do as you may. Whether you succeed or fail, know that I
shall be
>grateful for the trying. Know that my prayers shall go with you,

wishing for your success in this venture."
>
Hotaru caught Ranma's eye and saw a small nod. Nodding herself,
she
>waved her arm and ordered everyone back. "Just wait behind me. I
don't
want anyone to get hurt."
>
Once she was sure that everyone was safe, Hotaru faced the gates
side
>on and lifted the Silence Glaive. Somehow, just the intention to use
it
made the massive weapon feel even lighter, as though to
encourage her
>to keep freeing the destruction she knew she kept bottled up inside

every day of the week. She was concentrating on the size, trying
to
>measure up the place to ensure that she would not overshoot when the

Droids finally made it out of the house. Without a Kuno to guide
them
>through the traps, the three Droids had been delayed considerably,
but
they were as implacable as they were unstoppable.

>
"Um... Hotaru, now would be a really good time to start..."

>
Flashing Ranma a quick smile, Hotaru turned back to the gates,

>completely unconcerned by the three, large, rushing forms that were

crossing the grass in broad strides. They were no threat.

>
"SILENCE GLAIVE SURPRISE!"

>
Dropping the end of her glaive in an arc, the tip touched the
ground,

>and the Silence reached out. All noise vanished, and entropy seemed
to
set in throughout the vista. The Droids, once such powerful
enemies,

>barely managed another step before they vanished. Although little
time
passed, barely a second, everyone could clearly see every
incredible

>moment as the flesh and bones seemed to lift off the monsters and they

dissolved into the air.
>
So too, the house, the trees, the rocks and everything else within
>range of Hotaru's attack was surrounded by the all consuming Silence.

Walls disintegrated and the roof lifted off the house, silently and
>rapidly peeling away into nothingness. As destruction walked its way

through the Kuno estate visiting everything without favouritism, not a
>sound was to be heard. For this was the Silence, the all-consuming end

that reached out for everything.
>
With the precision of a ticking clock, that single suspended second of
>destruction and Silence passed. From where Hotaru's Silence Glaive

touched the grounds outwards a great swath of land had been cleared. Of
>the trees and mansion, there was not a single sign remaining. There was

no debris or rubble; everything in the path of her weapon had simply
>gone, more thoroughly than any moving company could possibly achieve.

>The weapon had struck at ground level, wiping out the house and

anything above ground but from where they stood they could see cellars
>and pipes sticking up. Occasionally a small spout of water squirted up,

testimony to the fact that water pressure still existed, even if the
>taps were no longer there.

>Turning back to her friends, Hotaru had a spring in her step and a

smile on her face. "That was fun! I've never gotten to use any of my
>attacks before. What are we going to do next?"

>Ranma's mouth hung open slackly. "W-Wow... W-Was that your biggest

attack? You've said before how they were really powerful..."

>
"No, of course not, Ranma-san!" Hotaru felt bright and perky after
>having unleashed the Silence, and it showed in her speech. "That was my

smallest attack. That's why I can't use them in battle."

>
Looking back at the house - or where it used to be - Ranma could only
>shake his head in amazement. Even his most powerful Shi Shi Hokodan

could not even do a hundredth of that. Who was he kidding? He could not
>do a thousandth! Seeing that, he could almost understand why the Senshi

were so afraid of little Hotaru. That much power in the hands of the
>wrong person would be terrifying beyond description.

>Despite the sheer scope of the destruction, what scared Ranma the most

was how easily she had done it. In the past, he had seen Hotaru ready
>for collapse after a hundred metre run. But now she had just levelled

the entire Kuno estate and she did not even break a sweat. Everyone he
>knew, even Cologne or Happosai, wore themselves out with their big

attacks. If this was just a warm-up for Hotaru, he feared what she
>could produce when she was pressed for it.

>"Let's... Let's go back home. We gotta find Ryoga, and I think Kuno

needs a rest. Besides, I don't want to hang around here any
longer than
>we need to. Not only that, but I think you better tell us all about

your attacks again... And I'm sure we're all gunna listen really
hard
>this time."

>---
End of Chapter.
>

>

> <p><p>

9. A Lukewarm Reception

> \
> | Vengeance And A Half |
 _____/

>
Thanks to my pre-readers:

>Ben
aevan <http://aevan.virtualave.net>

>Kevin D. Hammel <http://www.anime.sobhrach.com/~khammel/>

>Blood Blade <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Towers/5920>

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>
What has happened:

>The time travel of Prince Diamond and the Inner Senshi at the end of

Sailor Moon R has caused a paradox. Now the Outer Senshi are
awake, the

>Death Busters are active, and the Dark Moon Family are still trying
to
conquer the world. In a desperate bid to stop a Daimon from
gaining her

>Heart Crystal, the Outer Senshi were responsible for Akane's death.
Now
Nabiki, Cologne and Genma are providing support for the
growing team

>seeking to defeat the demons and the Senshi.

>The forces of good - no matter whose perspective you are looking
from -
are besieged from all sides. The only thing preventing a
complete and

>devastating victory for any side is the fact that no two forces can

cooperate.

>
The Senshi have an ever widening schism between the Inner and
Outers,

>while Ranma's friends have been shocked to learn that Kodachi has

apparently joined forces with the Dark Moon Family. The same
family to

>which Black Lady owes her allegiance, unbeknownst to her new friend

Ryoga.

>
Pluto is unconscious in a coma, Mistress 9's host has been
spirited

>away from Tomoe Souichi who was helping her manifest, and Ranma's

friends are prevented from any form of direct action due to their

>failure to score any significant victories.

>All hopes seem lost, for the forces of good and evil alike.

>Part 8: A Lukewarm Reception
=====

>
Groaning in pain, Tenou Haruka lifted her stiff and swollen knee and
>placed it onto another cushion. Replacing the ice pack, she lay back

down and turned to face the television again. Although she had been
>staring at the TV for the last two hours, she could not say what had

been showing. It was merely on as a distraction, a way to try and avoid
>thinking about her recent failure.

>It was not working very well at that, since all she could do was think

about how she and Michiru had been pounded in their last battle.
>
A day ago they had gone up against Black Lady. From what they knew, she
>was the right-hand woman in the Dark Moon Family. Although they had not

received anything as clear as a memo on the subject, they had gathered
>from previous encounters that Emerald served Diamond, but Black Lady

was more or less on equal footing with him. After the way she had

>tossed them around in the battle, Haruka sincerely hoped that Diamond

was not going to be any more powerful than Black Lady, otherwise they
>were done for.

>There was the obvious answer of course. If she and Sailor Neptune could

plague the Death Busters long enough, they would recover the three
>Talismans. This in turn would release their Super Sailor forms, and

Haruka knew from her fragmented and often incomplete memory that those
>forms and the attacks that came with them would go a long way to having

them stand on equal footing with Black Lady.

>
Rolling onto her back and looking at the ceiling, Haruka wondered who
>the man was that had interrupted their fight yesterday. She had seen

him before, wandering around and looking completely gormless, but

>yesterday he had shown them a new trick, and Neptune had confirmed how

dangerous he could be. Although normally he was not much more than a
>pest, when he used the Dark Crystal, he became rather a threat. An

immobile, easy target, but still a threat.
>
Letting her mind rest, Haruka closed her eyes and tried to bring to
>mind an image of the boy they had fought. Lying there, she pictured him

in her mind. He was big - at least as tall as her, possibly more - and
>much broader across the shoulder. He had a sort of power-lifter's build

to him, but he moved with the same fluid grace that she herself had,
>and that meant he must have a fair amount of fighting skill. Smirking

to herself, Haruka decided she knew how to defeat him. Although he
>could obviously use some sort of magic since he managed to throw some

energy blasts at Sailor Neptune even before he got to the statue, he
>would be no match for her Sailor form's strength and speed up close.

>Despite the pain in her swollen knee, Haruka smiled at the thought

of
getting in close and beating the stuffing out of him. To her magically
>attuned senses the boy seemed unexceptional. Sailor Uranus was anything
but unexceptional, she went all the way to magnificent. With magically
>enhanced speed, power and resistance, she could knock any normal man
into next week without even trying.
>
Although she enjoyed thinking about getting a good victory, she could
>not forget how she felt after the battle. Previously, the only time she
had suffered a really heavy come-down was after injuring or killing a
>civilian while Sailor Uranus. Her Senshi powers not only inured her to
physical harm, they also protected her from all the psychological
>stresses and strains that went with combat. In battle, Sailor Uranus
was an enemy to fear, no matter who you were. Cold, calculating,

>implacable; she could match wits and dedication with anyone on the
planet. After the battle, Tenou Haruka took over, and she was not quite
>as mentally fortified.

>Her battle the previous day had just been against Black Lady and her
cohort, but the sheer killing hatred that Sailor Uranus kept tight
>rein on left Haruka feeling nauseous for hours afterwards. Even worse
was the fear. Fear of dying, fear of failure, fear of letting Neptune
>down; all of these things Uranus could keep bottled up in a little jar
deep inside her stomach and not let them out. After Neptune had pulled
>her out of a crater and dragged her limp body back home, Uranus had
reverted to her normal form, and the shakes had set in.

>
Even now, twenty-four hours after the event, Haruka could only just
>keep her hand steady. She, a professional race driver, a person who
thrived on adrenaline, was suffering from shell shock as bad as any
>trench warfare soldier. Black Lady's terrible magical bombardment had
literally shaken her world. Until then, she had never even seen such
>power. Her mind told her that her Queen could do all that and more -
she too should be able to match it in her Eternal form if they ever
>found out how to unlock it - but being on the receiving end of the
detonations was an educational experience.
>
Every time she remembered back to how it looked, she started shaking
>again. After taking a direct hit from Sailor Uranus' World Shaking,
Black Lady had stood up again completely unfazed. Acting as though the
>dirt on her dress was her only concern, the woman had hovered in the
air and sent black death charging down towards the Senshi. That was the
>part that made Haruka shake. When she was Uranus, she had coldly dived
out of the way, saving herself only by luck and the grace of God.
>Looking back on it, she could not believe how close she had come to
being killed.

>
It was the dying part that terrified her. There was still so much to do.

>She had school and a career, but these were petty in the greater scheme
of things. There was her love for Michiru, the elegant Sailor Neptune,

>which was growing deeper and stronger every day. Where Uranus provided
the strength on the battlefield, Michiru provided it in their private

>lives, helping to hold her together when everything seemed too much to
handle.

>
Just as importantly - though sometimes she could not understand why she

>felt this way - Haruka wanted to restore the Moon Kingdom. It might
have been dead and buried, nothing more than dust for millennia, but

>she was alive and the legacy of the Kingdom and the peace and love it
represented lived on within her. Even with everything else going on in

>her life, that was one of Haruka's fondest wishes. She wanted to go
down on one knee and swear fealty to the Queen, to give her allegiance

>to someone wise, strong, just and noble. To her, that mattered. That
was what she fought for; for a brighter future, where people could live

>in peace and happiness. Where love and safety could be the rule, rather
than the exception. A place where there would be no need for warriors

>like Sailor Neptune or Sailor Uranus.

>That was why she hated Sailor Moon and her minions. The supposed
Princess opposed them every step of the way. Where she and Michiru

>sought to bring down Black Lady and her ilk, the Inner Senshi seemed to
defend them. Where she and Neptune were willing to go the extra

>distance and make the hard decisions to prevent the Death Busters from
gaining the power of the Talismans and the energy in people's Heart

>Crystals, again the Inners opposed them.

>Some days it felt as though she spent more effort trying to get through
the Inner Senshi to do her job than she actually expended fighting the

>real threat. By themselves, the Inner Senshi seemed fairly benign,
without any particular agenda other than presenting a false Princess in

>the hopes of ruling the Moon Kingdom. However, if they were in the same
area as the Outers, the two inevitably clashed.

>
In recent days, prior to fighting Black Lady, things had gone to the

>next step in the rivalry between Inner and Outer Senshi. On the way to
another fight the two forces had met. Haruka could not remember how it

>started but even without the Death Busters, the Dark Moon Family, or
the semi-powerful vigilantes, the Inners and Outers had clashed. Like

>so many other pointless battles, there had been no winners or losers,
only a mutual withdrawal, but it was a progression. Now they did not

>need a reason to fight. All they needed was to sight the others, and
the magic began to fly. There was so much bad blood between them both

>sides now felt the "innocent until proven guilty" rule could be waived
in favour of expediency.
>
Haruka was still lying there with her eyes closed, meditating on what
>it would take to make such cute girls turn bad when the door opened and
she heard the measured steps of her partner coming through the house.
>While Haruka rested and tried some good old-fashioned treatments for
her injuries, Michiru had gone to the local store for some vegetables
>to make dinner. Since Haruka still had some meat in the freezer, they
had taken it out to thaw and were planning a special dinner. Not as a
>celebration, but more as a consolation.

>A heavy "thud" sound beside her head prompted Haruka to open her eyes
and find Michiru's concerned face. "Everything OK at the store?"
>
"Sure, the store was fine. Take a look at the paper and tell me how
>fine things really are."

>Carefully, Haruka groped around for the paper that had landed near her
head. When she found it, she began scanning the front page. It did not
>take long to find what Michiru was referring to, you would have to be
blind to miss it. According to the newspaper, the mansion belonging to
>a wealthy Tokyo family had "vanished" yesterday afternoon.

>Reading from the paper, Haruka spoke aloud. "A witness described the
event as a complete mystery. The house and grounds had literally been
>there one second, and gone the next. 'It was completely silent', said
the witness. 'Normally in Tokyo you can always hear something, but then
>it was just completely quiet. I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't
been admiring their roses at the time.'"
>
Lowering the paper, Haruka looked up at Michiru's strained face.

>"'Completely silent' they said."

>Michiru nodded. "Can you think of anyone with an attack like that?"

>Looking down at the newspaper again, Haruka admired the aerial before
and after photos. "How many people do you think worked in a place that
>size? Twenty? Thirty maybe?"

>"Thirty's probably a safe figure. Especially when you consider there
would have been a family living there. If you keep reading the article,
>the only one they have listed one person as missing so far. I guess
that means she's a safe bet for DOA. Saturn is not known for leaving
>many alive."

>Haruka closed her eyes and tried to hold in the stinging tears. It was
not supposed to be this way. This was why they had tried so hard. Tried
>to protect the world from Sailor Saturn the only way it could be. Once
again, they had failed, and once again people had paid the price.
>
Haruka felt Michiru's arm's slide around her as the girl knelt on the

>floor. "Shh. It's OK, Haruka. It's not your fault. We did the best we
could. Just remember that. This is Sailor Saturn's fault, not yours.
>You can't protect everyone, no matter how hard you try."

>This time it had only been a mansion in the middle of a huge estate.

What happened the next time Sailor Saturn encountered a Droid or Daimon
>in the middle of a crowded section of Tokyo? If she used the Silence

Glaive Surprise in a business district like Akasaka during business
>hours, the dead would be listed in the hundreds of thousands.

>* * *

>"All right, Ami. Let's start with the easy ones."

>"Right." Looking around the room to make sure she had everyone's

attention, Ami activated the slide projector. She had connected it to
>the Mercury computer so that she could do a presentation of what they
knew.
>
"OK, first of all we have the Dark Moon Family. I'm sure everyone...
>err, aside from you and Artemis, Luna. I'm sure everyone remembers what
they are after. When we spoke to King Endymion in the future, he said
>that they were disgruntled rebels, and they wanted to overthrow the
Moon Kingdom.
>
"Unfortunately the Ayakashi Sisters didn't survive in this timeline, so
>I haven't been able to check with them about what is going on now. The
best information that we have is they are still trying to do what
>Emerald was doing before we all went to the future. That means they are
trying to pull as much dark energy as possible into Tokyo. If they can
>succeed in that, they can destroy Crystal Tokyo before it is formed,
and cause the revolution they were hoping for."
>
Luna and Artemis frowned at the idea that anyone would want to

>overthrow the reborn Moon Kingdom, but they held their peace. Around
the room, everyone was silent and attentive, which was a near miracle
>considering the fact that Usagi was sitting front and centre in the
group.
>
Pressing a key on her computer, Ami advanced the picture to Black Lady.
>"We all know that Black Lady is really Chibi-Usa, Usagi-chan's daughter
from the future, but she's been corrupted by the Wiseman. He works for
>the Black Moon Family, and she seems to be following suit. I'm afraid
that's about all any of us have been able to find out about her, other
>than the fact that she is really powerful.

>"From what I could tell, Black Lady has all of Chibi-Usa's memories,
they've just been warped somehow so that she hates Sailor Moon and the
>rest of us. I honestly don't know how she feels about the Black Moon
Family, but since she is working for them, that might be academic at
>the moment."

>Next the blue haired girl clicked through a series of slides showing

various members of the Death Busters and the Daimons. "We know they are
>called the Death Busters, and we know they are stealing the Heart

Crystals from people, but we have no idea why. Honestly, I don't even
>have a clue why, unless it is just a different way for them to collect
energy."
>
Makoto frowned and clenched a fist. "I bet those Outer Senshi know."
>
Amid a chorus of agreement, Ami nodded and sighed. "I do to, Mako-chan,
>but has anyone been able to talk to them?"

>When everyone, even Usagi shook their heads, Ami resignedly pressed the
button again and this time showed Uranus and Neptune. "Just like all of
>the other pictures, I recorded this one with my visor. Let's see... I
took this one four days ago, when we... err, ran into them near the
>primary school."

>Turning to the cats, Usagi tried to see if they knew anything that had
been missed before. "Are you sure you don't know anything about them?
>Anything at all?"

>Usagi's loyal advisor Luna was the first to respond. "I'm sorry, Usagi-
sama. We honestly don't know anything. Back in the Silver Imperium the
>Outer Senshi were some of the strongest supporters of the Moon Kingdom.
And I mean strong in every way. Not only were they powerful, but they
>were incredibly loyal. Personally I think it had to do with how far
they were from Earth. When you are that far from help and justice, you
>have to be able to rely on being backed up by a fair and just ruler.

>"Queen Serenity was exactly that sort of ruler, and the Outers loved
her for it. Everyone did, but since the Outers were not able to attend
>court as often as the Inner Senshi, I think they carried the torch of
loyalty even stronger in their hearts. To them, it was an ideal, not
>just a way of life. Where we lived with peace, wisdom and justice every
day, they were the ones appointed to carry that burden in the Queen's
>place so far from Earth. To them, the Moon Kingdom was everything.
Everything!"
>
The black cat shook its head sadly. "They loved the Kingdom and the
>Queen, and that is why this is so hard for me. After so many months
with the Inner Senshi fighting each other, it is so good to have you
>back together. Just as that miracle occurs, we are at odds with the
Outer Senshi. They believe in the same things we do, why can't we all
>just get along?"

>Artemis put a paw on Luna's back as his friend hung her head in sadness.
"Personally," Artemis began in his rough voice.
"Personally I think
>it's like religion. Catholics and Protestants are both Christians, but
you never hear about them getting on together. Sometimes all it takes

>is a little difference in how you see things, and you become enemies.
Just ask the Irish."

>
"But we shouldn't be enemies, Artemis!" Usagi whined. "We should be

>friends."

>"I'm sorry, Usagi-sama. All I'm saying is maybe they don't know you the
way we do. Maybe they don't respect you the way we do. All I can say is

>I sincerely hope that the Outer Senshi came through the awakening with
their memories intact and functional. If they can't remember the Moon

>Kingdom and they genuinely are our enemies, then heaven help us all.
You girls can testify just how tough they can be."

>
More than one head nodded at that. Getting roughed up to some degree

>was becoming par for the course as a Senshi. The Droids were tougher
these days. They Daimons were outright nasty. Black Lady or the Witches

>working for the Death Busters were extremely bad. Where the Senshi had
managed to defeat Emerald and Rubius in the past, and had defeated all

>of the Dark Kingdom's minions in their day, so far they had not come
close to dealing a good blow to any of the Witches 5.

>
Rubbing an arm, Hino Rei nodded to Ami. "Speaking of tough, what do you

>have on those others? Heck, I don't even know what they're called!"

>By now each of the Senshi had their own hard luck story from dealing
with the rouge element in the equation. Although the fighters had not

>been as aggressive recently as they had been when first they met,
everyone had had their own opportunity to become intimately acquainted

>with the frightful strength that normal people can possess. They might
not have taken the same beating that Sailor Venus had received that

>first fateful time, but there had been more than one girl limping home.

>Oddly enough, the only one of the Inner Senshi that did not feel overly
averse to this group of enemies was Sailor Jupiter. Twice now she had

>personally clashed with the petite red-head that led so many of the
sallies against the Senshi, and each time the two had fought to an

>almost standstill. Although she used magic to boost herself, she could
recognise the immense skill the girl possessed. Even though the redhead

>was an agent of evil, Jupiter could not keep her competitive streak
down and the thought of facing her again took her back to the heady

>days of Junior High when she had fought the bigger kids and built her
own reputation. For her and the redhead, it was a relationship of mixed

>respect and hatred, for no matter what Jupiter felt on a personal basis,
she would not let anyone hurt Usagi the way this girl tried to.

>
Ami sighed and shook her head. As she spoke, she brought up more

>pictures to complement her words. "Again, I'm afraid we know very

little, and the news I do have is mixed good and bad.
>
"The good news is that they are not as strong as we are. There might be
>a couple more of them than we have on our side, but most of them are

not as fast, and none of them have magic that even remotely compares to
>ours. Well, all but one have no magic, but I'll get to her later.

>"This man calls himself the Blue Thunder Of Tokyo. I've searched the

microfiche files for eight newspapers at the library, but I can't find
>anyone using that name. I'm afraid it's a complete dead end. From what

we've seen, he seems to be the leader.
>
"Tuxedo Kamen suggested that this next man is probably his second in
>command." The photo showed Ryoga snarling in anger with a fist raised.
"I took this picture just before he hit me, and I can tell you how
>strong he is. I'm afraid I haven't seen anything to back up Tuxedo

Kamen's suggestion. Sorry."
>
The girls and cats mumbled amongst themselves for a few moments, but
>they could not come up with anything that supported his suggestion

either. Rei suggested that Mamoru was just showing a bit of male

>chauvinism; while Usagi waved her quiet for picking on her boyfriend,
she did not refuse what the miko said either.

>
"We don't have a name for any of these other people either, so I'll go
>through most of them fairly quickly." Good to her word, Ami gave a

short rundown on the observed capabilities of each of Ranma's friends
>other than Sailor Saturn.

>"Despite popular opinion, this one is my personal recommendation for

the leader. I... I can't really say why, but she is." The screen showed
>a red-haired, pig-tailed girl locked in combat with Sailor Jupiter.

Disturbingly, both combatants had fierce smiles on their faces.

>
"With the possible exception of the Blue Thunder..." Ami directed an
>innocent look at Mamoru sitting at the back of the room when she said

this. "With that possible exception, she is definitely the best
>fighter in their team. Up close, I'd say she would probably come close

to beating anyone other than Mako-chan. So be really careful if you
>meet her. Some of us... Some of us I would probably lose against the

girl as it is, even with our Senshi powers."
>
"The only other good news I have is we finally have some information
>regarding their motivations." Everyone in the room gave a collective

gasp. Even the cats were surprised and impressed by Ami's assertion.
>"More than once, I've heard them call out something about a girl called

'Akane', and they usually mention something about revenge. I'm sure
>you've all heard that?"

>Continuing, Ami brought up a newspaper clipping, displaying it on

the
wall with her computer. "This is an article in the Tokyo Daily, talking
>about a Daimon attack a few weeks ago. According to the paper, Tendo

Akane was killed by a pair of girls wearing stylised school uniforms
>while she was being attacked by a monster. The article is not very

descriptive, but reading between the lines, and adding in what else we
>know, I've been able to extrapolate a likely scenario.

>"It is my theory that this Tendo Akane was killed by the Outer Senshi
after one of the Death Buster's Daimons stole her Heart Crystal. It
>fits the Outers established Modus Operandi, and the timing coincides

with three significant events. These are: our return from the future,
>the awakening of the Outers, and the commencement of the Death Buster's
activities. To all appearances, what we have here is a set of revenge
>driven individuals, and that's where the good news ends.

>"Interestingly enough - and probably just as good for us - is the fact
that they seem to hate everyone out there. Reading eyewitness accounts
>and newspaper reports, these people have been mixing it up with

everyone. Us, the Death Buster, the Dark Moon Family, the Outer Senshi,
>even themselves a little if some of the reports are to be believed. I
guess it all comes back to the whole idea of trying to get revenge for
>Miss Tendo, even if they are badly overmatched.

>"When I was trying to find out more about Miss Tendo, I tried looking
up details on her friends and family, to see if they matched the
>profile of anyone we might have been fighting. I haven't had time to go
through everyone in her school, but so far I have checked the class
>photo and history of everyone in her year. This is her family... I got
this photo from an award shot at a martial arts competition she won a
>year ago, so it is fairly recent.

>"The school's yearbook photo did have one person who resembled one of
our enemies. But the boy, Kuonji Ukyo doesn't have a sister. He looked
>so similar to the brown haired girl we were fighting, I had to check up
on him, but his family register only lists him.
>
"As you can see, no one in the Tendo's photo bears any resemblance to
>our enemies. I couldn't even see any family resemblance. In the
background search I did, I also found out that Miss Tendo was engaged.
>This is a picture of her fiancée, a Saotome Ranma. There's a passing
resemblance to the red-head, but his family records don't pan out

>either. I'm afraid he's an only child."

>The rest of the Inner Senshi were sitting there with their mouths open.
This was far more than they had ever expected Ami to discover. Usagi -
>whose study and research habits had never been good - was completely
awed. She had known Ami the longest and realised they were only just

>beginning to scratch the surface of an otherwise hidden talent. They

all knew Ami was brilliant and hard working, but until now there
had
>never been anything to clearly show them what that meant in
practice.
High test scores at school were one thing, but this was
in another
>league altogether. In the time she had worked on it, Ami had done

enough digging to make an entire newspaper's research team seem

>inadequate and understaffed by comparison.

>"That is absolutely amazing, Ami-chan! How did you find out so much?

You must have spent every single hour in the library!"

>
Blushing under the praise, Ami looked away. "Oh, come on,
Usagi-chan,
>you know that's not true. I still had to study for that maths exam

coming up next week and I needed to stay ahead of class and juku.

>Besides, it's really not all that good. Honestly."

>When her friends finally stopped telling her what first rate work
she
had done, Ami flicked over to the next picture. It was a
group shot of
>the fighters, with every looking at the photographer aside from the

Chinese boy with his glasses propped up on his head. He was
looking off
>to the side with a confused expression on his otherwise handsome
face.

>"Here's the really bad news: they're getting stronger. It's
difficult
to say exactly how or why, but the readings I'm getting
are always
>slightly better than the last time. At first I thought it was just
an
error, or the fact that they might not have been doing the
best
>initially, but now I'm convinced they're getting better.

>"Every time I've fought with one of them, I keep trying to track
things
like how fast they can move or punch. It also took me a
while, but now
>I can also measure the power in those energy blasts of theirs. As I

said before, they don't match up with our magic, but they are
getting
>stronger. Mako-chan, you're the best martial artist in the team,
what
do you think?"
>
The tall girl fingered her pony-tail thoughtfully before she
replied,
>and she spoke slowly and carefully. "I'm not sure, Ami-chan. I still

say I don't think it is possible to be _that_ good just using
martial
>arts. I know I'm pretty good, but these people would eat me for

breakfast if I wasn't Sailor Jupiter. Whether they're getting
better...
>That's just too hard to say. I've only fought her a couple of times,
so
it's not as though I have a good comparison. Besides, I think
she was
>able to remember some of my moves from the previous fight a
little."

>"Now, guys, I'm afraid I saved the worst for last." Click. This
slide
showed an image all of the Senshi were now able to
recognise. "Sailor
>Saturn... Where do I begin? Well, she's definitely on their side,

but I
have no idea why. I actually saw speculation in one newspaper that >suggested the Outers had attacked her, but they were not clear enough
to be sure of that. They could have been talking about us fighting the >Outers.
>"The short version is best, I think. She's there, she is awake, she has
her powers, and she is very, very careful about how she uses them."
>
That got more incredulous looks. Rei waved her hand for attention and >when Ami signalled her that she was not interrupting, the priestess
spoke as though she was trying to be gentle with someone who did not >quite grasp all the facts. "Maybe you missed this one, Ami-chan, but I
read this morning that Sailor Saturn destroyed an entire city block >with her attack. Do you really think that is being careful?"

>The genius smiled indulgently, as though for a slow student. "You know,
I thought that very article was interesting myself, Rei-chan, >especially since it seemed so different from what I had observed, so I
did a little more checking. From what I have gleamed from the papers, I >think we can safely assume that this was the first time Saturn has used
her Silence Glaive Surprise. The sort of damage that it can do would be >too hard to miss or cover up, and that has not been in the papers until
yesterday.
>
"Now yesterday, that was very interesting too. Did you know that of >eighteen major Tokyo newspapers, only one of them listed any
fatalities? Since that paper stated that there were seventy-six dead >and another thirty heavily wounded in part of a government nuclear
experiment gone haywire, I think we should pass on it. Most of them >indicated only a few missing people, with no confirmed deaths. Of
course, with what Luna and Artemis have told us about the attack, I >don't think they will find any bodies, if indeed anyone died.

>"You see, I checked the ownership on the home that was destroyed. Only
three people lived there, one of them is listed by his job as on >sabbatical, and one of the others - the son - called in sick for school
today, just like he has every other day for the past week.

>
"All I've come up with is one missing person. I looked up a picture of >her too, but she wasn't any of the fighters either. This is exactly
what I mean, Rei-chan. Sailor Saturn has been very careful with what >she has done. I'm not sure what happened to Miss Kuno, maybe she's on
holidays or maybe she was actually hurt, but she would be the first >person Saturn has hurt.
>"Now think about the number of times we've either fought her or seen
her hiding in the back of a battle while the others fought. Just

think

>about the times she could have done something to us, but she didn't.
I
can think of at least one occasion where she could have fairly safely

>used something as powerful as what destroyed the Kuno home and only hit
us. All she's ever used is her Silence Wall.

>
"I think that says a lot."

>
Usagi was the first to speak in the following silence, sounding both

>nervous and hopeful. "Ami-chan... Do you means she might not really be
bad? She might not be dangerous to us?"

>
"I... I can't say that. There's no denying Sailor Saturn is dangerous.

>She's demonstrated that she can do the Silence Glaive Surprise, so
there is no question of whether she is dangerous. The main question is:

>is she our enemy?"

>The blonde's face fell. "She must be. She must hate us. We were all so
afraid of her, and I tried to heal her without even asking. She must

>think I'm a horrible person now. Besides... If she's hanging around
with those others, she has to think we're the bad guys, even if she is

>a Senshi too."

>Luna climbed into Usagi's lap and tried to comfort her. "Usagi-sama,
don't be to hard on yourself. You did the best you could, and you tried

>to do the best for everyone else as well as you knew how. Now that we
know better... Well, if she's a Senshi and she really is good, then

>we'll be able to get her to join up with us in a jiffy!"

>"Oh, I hope you're right, Luna, I really do."

>Usagi might have intended to continue, but the door burst open and Aino
Minako, part time Senshi of love, Sailor Venus, burst in huffing and

>puffing. "Whew! Sorry I'm late, everyone. I ran here straight from
detention. Did I miss anything?"

>
The assorted Senshi groaned and Artemis covered his head, personally

>embarrassed that his charge could be that late and that naive.

>"We just finished." Rei said in a dry voice.

>"Don't worry, Mina-chan." Ami began in her usual happy tone. "I've got
everything prepared as handouts in case anyone wanted to take them home

>and study them. They're much more thorough than what I just said. You
can read them tonight if you like."

>
"Umm... Thanks, Ami-chan... I think..." Looking around the blonde

>finally found Rei amongst her friends and selected a spot next to her
on the floor.

>
Since the main purpose of the meeting was finished, no one noticed when

>Minako sat down next to Rei and began gossiping. Usagi was already
cornering Makoto on the subject of a boy the tall Senshi had seen

>earlier. Although he had not quiet looked like Makoto's old boyfriend,
rumour had it that he had warranted a second glance, and Usagi wanted

>all of the juicy details. With Ami already going over her notes to

see
if she needed to update them so the Senshi could study them at home,

>Rei was an easy target.

>"So, Rei-chan. Why didn't you hire another hunky guy like Yuuichiro?"

>"Huh? What are you talking about?"

>"The new girl out the front. The one selling wards. I really think you
should of picked a guy with a nice body. I mean, if you have to work

>with him, he should be good looking right?"

>Rei scratched her head and looked confused. "I have absolutely no idea
what you are babbling about this time, Mina-chan."

>
Throwing up her hands in a theatrical display of frustration, Minako

>explained the situation to the shrine maiden in slow, small words so
she could understand. "There is a girl out the front of the shrine.

>She's wearing a miko's robes. She is selling wards. Are you with me so
far?"

>
Rei shook her head. "No. We haven't hired anyone."

>
"Oh..." Minako thought for a moment then gave a sunny smile. "I guess

>it doesn't matter then. Just remember, next time you hire someone, make
sure he's a real hunk."

>
When Minako went to rise and grab some food with her leader, Rei

>snatched her arm to prevent her from leaving. "Hang on, you still
haven't told me anything about this person."

>
"What's there to tell? She's selling wards to keep demons away. They

>must be pretty good, since she's offering a money back guarantee."

>Rei was impressed. "Wow. Something strong enough to keep away a Droid
or Daimon has to be pretty impressive. Maybe I ought to go and have a

>chat to her. I could learn something."

>Sighing, Minako dug around inside her skirt pocket before pulling out a
sheet of white paper with strange writing on it. "Well, I was going to

>save this for our next fight, but I guess you can have a look at it. I
wanted to surprise you by sealing away the Droid just like you do

>sometimes."

>Looking at the ward, Rei realised that she could not read a single one
of the inscriptions on it. Whoever had made this obviously learnt from

>a significantly different branch of Shinto than she did. Reaching out
gently, Rei took the paper in her hands and studied it. Turning it over

>a few times, the scowl on her face got progressively larger and fiercer.

>"Minako... How much did she charge you for this?"

>"Hmm... Most of my weeks allowance. But it would have been worth it to
see your face when I used it!"

>
Sadly shaking her head, Rei stood up and patted her friend on the

>shoulder. "You've been duped. This is just an ordinary piece of paper.
I'm going to go down there and tell her to get lost. She

can't sell
>things like this in front of the shrine! It'll be an insult to everyone
who has ever worked here."
>
"It's a fake?! Rei-chan! Get me my money back! She can't do this!"
>
Giving a stern nod, Rei stalked out of the room and through the shrine grounds. Descending the stairs she passed the familiar stone tablet
declaring the Hikawa Jinja and looked left and right along the street.
>The woman selling the wards was not hard to spot. She wore bright red
pants like Rei, and the same traditional white top. Where Rei's long black hair was held back in place with a white tie, the stranger's was
cut short in a bob. Other than that, the two girls were dress

>identically.
>"Hey! You there! What are you doing selling these in front of my
shrine?"
>
The woman, since she looked a few years older than Rei, smiled coldly.
>"Selling them. Why? Do you want to buy one?"
>"No! I don't want to buy them! I want you to stop selling them! They're
complete garbage!"
>
Seeing Rei was waving one of her wards, Nabiki raised an eyebrow and
was momentarily glad that there were no customers there at the moment.
"I assure you, Miss, that you must have gotten a defective one. I would
gladly refund your money if you are attacked while carrying it."

>"Refund my money?!" Veins started to pop out on Rei's forehead as she
closed with the fake priestess. "It's useless! This thing couldn't stop
a fly let alone a Droid or Daimon. You're nothing but a fake and a
charlatan! What's more, I'm going to tell that to anyone that I see
coming near here."
>Narrowing her eyes, Nabiki refused to back down a single centimetre. "I
have just as much right to be here and sell them as anyone else.
>There's no law against me doing so; I've checked. If you attempt to say
anything about them, I can get you for slander."

>
"Humph! I'd like to see you try! This shrine has been here for hundreds
of years, and I can get my grandfather down here in an instant to
testify that they're noting but paper. Try and sell that!"

>
"You ought to be careful what you are trying to do. The law still
refuses to recognise the existence of spiritual or mediumistic powers.
In a court of law you cannot disprove what I am saying, and I give a
full refund guarantee. Don't try and fight me, girl. You'll lose."
>Nabiki smirked. She might not be able to fight like Ranma, but that did
not mean she could not fight at all. Not going to school meant that she
missed her regular gambling rings and extortion rackets. Getting

into a
good argument for the first time in weeks was like a cool shower after

>trek in the desert.

>The priestess-in-training of the Hikawa shrine ran a hand through her
fringe and glared at the stranger. "Don't you have any conscience at

>all? People could get hurt if they rely on these things."

>"Oh, please, what do you take me for? Of course I don't have a
conscience. I'm a business woman. And I'm in the business of making

>money, so if you would please just move along, I would be quiet happy.
Besides, I'll only be here a few more months. The fools who buy this

>seem to be much happier when I sell it out the front of a shrine.
Slaves to their culture, I guess."

>
Rei gaped like a fish out of water. "You don't... You don't even care

>if they're fake..."

>"I care about the money, and what that can buy me. I care about what I
make off these bits of paper and the gullibility of the people who walk

>by here. I care about the fact that this money is the only thing
keeping my family fed and in medical supplies. But do I care if they're

>fake? No, not at all."

>"Right! If that's the way you want to do it, then I'm going to set up a
business here too! Except I'll be selling the real thing. You won't

>stand a chance! I'll run you out of here even if it is the last thing I
do."

>
That gave Nabiki pause. She did not care what the miko did. Nabiki

>could print as many of these as she wanted to in a night, and there was
no minimum price on them, so she had no risk of being undercut. The

>main risk she faced was the fact that this over-zealous religious nut
might drop the prices too far and impact her earnings that way. However,

>if that did happen, there were plenty of other places in the city that
she could sell her wares without competition. It was more the fact that

>the miko felt she could threaten Nabiki that got the saleswoman's
attention.

>
"Do you really think you can outdo me? Do you think you can produce

>more of those things in a single night than I could sell?"

>Rei stood her ground. "I will if I need to. Shinto is an important part
of people's lives. If we corrupt that by selling garbage like you have

>there, people will lose faith. It is my duty to this shrine to make
sure that people like you are put out of business."

>
"And just how little do you think you can make these for? My costs run

>at something like half a yen per ward, and I can sell them at between
two and three thousand yen. Can you really keep up with me?"

>
"I... I might not be able to make them that cheaply, but I'll do what I

>can. I know Gramps will back me up too. We'll make them, and we'll do
them right."

>
Gears were turning in Nabiki's head so fast that you could almost hear

>her thoughts at work. Any product capable of being sold was adequate. A
good product was even better. For something like this, a good product

>just might save lives. More importantly, if someone out there was
protected by a real ward, it might make Ranma's job just that little

>bit easier, and bring her sister's revenge one step closer.

>"Yesterday I sold almost three hundred wards, and today is looking
better since I've moved out here. Do you honestly think you can keep up

>with me?"

>Rei stumbled to a halt, the maths trying to work over in her head. Even
if she stayed up all night and had her grandfather help, there was no

>way that she could possibly produce that many in a single day, let
alone do it day-in, day-out like this girl was doing.

>
"N-No... I can't. But I'll still do my best! I'll drive you out of

>business any way I can."

>Donning a predatory grin, Nabiki made her current wares disappear from
the table. "Why drive me out of business? If you can really produce the

>goods, I'll buy them from you."

>"What?!"

>"You heard me. However many wards you can make, I'll buy. I'll even go
one better and say that I'll only sell the real thing outside your

>shrine. You can't get fairer than that."

>"But... But... Why?" Rei could not understand that complete about face
from the girl. One minute she was an adversary, the next she had the

>audacity to ask Rei to be one of her suppliers.

>"Why? I'll tell you why. Up until five minutes ago, I believed all of
this was just guff and feel-good mumbo-jumbo for the tourists and the

>gullible. If you can prove you've got the real thing, I'll change my
tune and I'm willing to take a hit to my profits to do it... So, what

>do you say? Can you put your money where your mouth is and prove you
can deliver on the goods?"

>
"I..." Rei closed her mouth with a snap and studied her opponent. The

>girl was as cool as a cucumber and plainly she was willing to go either
way. The raven haired priestess could not understand why someone would

>sell something they knew was a complete fake, nor could she understand
why that same person would be willing to sacrifice a healthy portion of

>their profits when presented with an opportunity to sell the real thing.
In her limited world view, these sorts of actions just did not make

>sense.

>Suddenly, something occurred to Rei. "Hang on! How am I supposed to
demonstrate that they work? It's not like I can produce a Daimon

out of
>thin air, you know!"

>Clucking a few times, Nabiki shook her head. "Gee, that's too bad.

Looks like I'll have to keep selling these then. I can't just buy
any
>junk. That would be bad for business."

>Rei was going to retaliate by commenting on how unfair that was when
a
voice rang out across the street. "Daimon Telephone! Attack
that girl!
>Seize her Heart Crystal. Hers is filled with the purity of greed. It
is
unsullied and perfect for our needs. Take it, so that we can
serve our
>Mistress!"

>Both heads whipped around and Nabiki gulped audibly when she saw the

woman's hand pointing at her. "Err... Now might be a great time
to
>demonstrate, but I'm going to have to leave. Bye!"

>Abandoning her table and fake wards, Nabiki sprinted down the street
as
the Daimon followed her bellowing. When the Daimon ran past
her, Rei
>smirked and hoped that Sailor Moon would get here soon, she would
not
be able to hold off the girl for long. Although Rei had
just been
>screaming and shouting at her, she was sincere in her beliefs. If
Rei
could save the opportunistic girl's life, she would, even if
it allowed
>the girl to come back and keep wrecking the good name of her
shrine.

>Deftly reaching into her jacket, Rei selected one of her own wards.
She
had started carrying around a few when she became Sailor
Mars, since
>you never knew when you would encounter one of the spawn of evil
that
made her job so hard. It paid to never be undefended. "Rin,
pyou, tou,
>sha, kai, jin, retsu, sai, zen. Akuryou taisan!"

>With her empowering chant finished, Rei threw the ward at the Daimon

where it stuck to its back. Daimons were too strong for a single
ward
>to defeat, but they were susceptible. Howling in pain from the

spiritual energy that was attached to its back, the Daimon
stumbled to
>a halt. Its large clawed hands scrabbled at the ward, attempting to

dislodge it. Distracted, the Daimon ceased its chase of the fake
miko
>long enough for the girl to gain a block or two of distance.

>Smiling as she heard the sound of booted feet racing down the stairs

from her home, Rei smiled and waved at the girl who had stopped
and
>turned to look back. "Is that a good enough demonstration?"

>As Sailor Moon began to make her speech and the Daimon finally
removed
the ward, Rei could not help but smile. Dimly, through
all the noise,
>she could hear the girl call out to her. "I'll be back in two days.
As
many as you can make!"
>
When the girl vanished around the corner, Rei let out a deep
breath.
>She may have stopped the girl from selling her useless wards, but
the
need for vigilance was still there, and the world was not

going to get

>cleaned up without her help. Unobserved, Rei stepped behind the wall at
the entrance to the shrine and raised her Henshin stick.

>
"MARS STAR POWER, MAKE UP!"

>
Returning to the street, Sailor Mars was just in time to rescue Sailor

>Moon as her leader marginally stumbled out of the way of one of the
Daimon's attacks. "Gee, Sailor Moon! Do I have to do everything around

>here?"

>"Oh, be quiet Mars, and just help me dust this thing!"

>Grinning from ear to ear, Mars brought her hands together to start her
attack. "With pleasure..."

>
* * *

>
Sapphire, Diamond's younger brother walked beside the soon-to-be new

>ruler of Crystal Tokyo. Unlike Diamond, Emerald or Rubius, Sapphire had
not given himself over to the power offered by the Wiseman. He was in

>this rebellion out a sense of loyalty to Diamond, not due to his desire
for power, nor any sort of quest to right past wrongs.

>
"I'm telling you, Brother, I do not think that the Wiseman is working

>in our best interests. He is... I'm not sure what he is doing exactly,
but I do know that it is not necessary to our defeating Queen

>Serenity."

>"The Wiseman has brought us this far, and his plans have been sound to
date. No, I shall continue to heed his advice until such time as he

>attempts to move against us. At that time, I shall show him the true
power of our family."

>
"As you wish, Brother, but I am concerned."

>
Passing through the large doors to the meeting hall, Diamond nodded to

>the Wiseman and spoke in a low tone to his sibling. "I understand what
you say, and it is noted, but for the time being, he is more a help

>than a hindrance. Until such time..."

>"Excellent." The Wiseman's voice was cold and cruel in the shadowed
hall. "You have all arrived. I would like to introduce my newest

>recruit. Please stand and be recognised by your... allies... Black
Rose."

>
Ignoring the uniformly intolerant looks she was garnering, Kodachi

>stood and walked into the middle of the room. She wore a floor length
dress as black as pitch, as dark as the heart of the Wiseman. On each

>side of the tight dress it was slit up to her thighs, exposing her pale
white flesh with every step she took. Although the dress was sleeveless,

>the Black Rose wore long, black opera gloves that went all the way to
her biceps. Unlike Black Lady whose dress was in varying shades of dark

>red, or Sapphire's clothes that held hi-lights of other colours,
Kodachi's apparel was pure black, without the slightest hint of

relief.

>
"Good evening, commoners. My name is the Black Rose, foremost artisan

>in the use of the Dark Crystal of Nemesis. Where you clumsily search in
the dark for ways to use our power, I shine like a light. Now that I am

>here, you can rest assured that your meagre efforts to date will
shortly be brought to greater heights as you benefit from the skills

>and wisdom that only someone of my standing can possess."

>Black Lady, from where she sat in mid-air to the right of Diamond,
looked down and smirked. "Confident, isn't she?"

>
"Indeed." In a louder voice, Diamond addressed the Wiseman. "I am the

>leader here, and I would ask upon whose authority it was that you
brought this woman here?"

>
"My deepest, most sincere apologies, Prince Diamond.

Regrettably, there

>was insufficient time to consult with you regarding the matter. The
Black Rose's position was tenuous at best where she lived. I am afraid

>that I needed to act first and discuss the matter with you later. I beg
that you consider her talents before you condemn either of us."

>
Sapphire tensed at Diamond's side, feeling the falseness of the

>Wiseman's apology, but his brother restrained him. "Very well then,
Wiseman. Tell us of your new plan, for surely you must have one that

>involves this woman."

>"Indeed I do, generous Prince. Indeed I do. Although the Black Rose's
power and capacity to use the dark energy that we harness is quiet

>limited, she is nonetheless able to do things that we have never been
able to. The Black Rose possesses a fineness of control that exceeds

>mine and anyone else's here in all respects. I have seen her craft the
Dark Crystal into a statue of such beauty it would make you weep to

>behold. She alone possesses the talents necessary to make Droids
completely independent of the crystal that spawned them.

Following her

>teachings, we can increase your abilities in battle tenfold.

>"Now that she is one of us, the Black Rose will conduct training for
all of you. She will teach you to do what only she can. With her

>teaching and my leadership, soon we will bring sufficient dark energy
into this world to ensure that Crystal Tokyo is destroyed before it is

>ever created."

>"Little man, I think you are delusional."

>Everyone turned and faced the Black Rose who continued in a nonchalant
tone of voice. "Do you really think I would teach everything I know to

>a set of fools and lack-wits like these? I, the Black Rose, reduced to
a mere teacher of the common class? I think not.

>
"No, instead I shall do what I have always done, directing my own

>brilliance to achieving my ends by any means. I shall not have the time
to spend with these people if I am to conduct my own research. Yes,
>that is how it must be. Once I am properly established and I have begun
to rewrite how your crystal can be used, only then will I be ready to
>make my mark upon the stage."

>"As much as I hate to admit it, I agree with the floozy in black."

Emerald was nothing if not blunt and she saw this as a good opportunity
>to gain favour with her prince. "We are the Dark Moon Family, the next
rulers of the Earth. I refuse to believe the someone like Prince
>Diamond could learn from this... this street tramp!"

>"Street tramp?! Why you!..." Summoning her newly granted energies to

her hand, the Black Rose prepared to blast the impudent Emerald.

>Prepared to that was, until she saw how easily the woman summoned an

even greater mass of swirling dark energy. Kodachi might be snide and
>look down upon people, but she was far from stupid. Just like in

Martial Arts Rhythmic Gymnastics, she knew that this battle was better
>not fought in a conventional arena. Rather than take on the obviously

more powerful Emerald, Kodachi settled for snarling in anger and
>silently plotting against the woman. She could not guard herself every

minute of every day.
>
When Emerald saw the Black Rose cave in to her threat so quickly she
>laughed and delicately waved her fan in front of her face. Her laugh

was so similar to Kodachi's it managed to set the new-comer's teeth on
>edge even more as the Black Rose convinced herself that Emerald was

stealing yet another of her more noted characteristics.

>
When the noise subsided, Diamond stepped forwards and gestured around
>the room. "While we all appreciate the effort that you have made for us,

Wiseman, I cannot help but think your plans are once again premature. I
>am willing to admit that there may be some small measure I might learn

from this woman, but now is not the time. As we speak, Sailor Moon and
>her ladies in waiting are running through this city.

>"From the first time that I saw her in Crystal Tokyo, I knew that

Sailor Moon was to be the person I would take as my wife. As much as I
>have enjoyed playing your games and planting those amusing statues for

you, I am afraid I have been neglecting other things.

>
"I would be most interested in hearing from you, Black Rose, once you
>have settled in and feel that you have a contribution to make. In the

meantime, I shall be seeing to my future kingdom and the woman destined
>to be my bride. Come, Sapphire. There is much that I must do."

>With that, Prince Diamond, ruler of the Dark Moon Family turned on his

heel and walked out of the room followed by his brother.

Simultaneously,
>the Black Rose departed from another door, leaving Emerald and Black

Lady awaiting the Wiseman's instructions.
>
Fuming, the Wiseman's hands manipulated his crystal ball with
almost
>frenetic activity. "Hnnnn... Closer, we need to draw more dark
energy
into this time. We need to draw more of Nemesis' power
before I can
>open the portal to the future and draw upon the full potential. That

ungrateful wench! I brought her here and gave her power beyond

>comprehension, and this is how she repays me?"

>"Wiseman." Emerald began. "Please, what is it that you desire? What
is
the next step in your plan to conquer the future and place
Prince
>Diamond upon the throne he deserves. Tell me, please. If my Prince
is
too busy to attend to these matters personally, you must allow
me. I
>_must_ show Diamond that I am the right one to be his Queen, not
this
Sailor Moon child. When I deliver to him the victory that
you have
>promised, surely then he will understand. Wiseman! You must help me

show Diamond the error of his ways."
>
The Wiseman chuckled, deep, low, slow and sinister. "Of course I
shall,
>my dear Emerald. I would be delighted to have you help me teach
Diamond
his errors. Yes, the more dark energy that you can bring
in, the sooner
>I will be able to make Prince Diamond see the facts. At that time, I

would be delighted to clear up any issues like his forthcoming
marriage
>for you, my good, loyal Emerald."

>Emerald smiled as she followed the Wiseman from the room. She knew
that
Sapphire was spreading rumours about him, but Emerald did
not believe
>them. Without the Wiseman, they would still be outcasts from Earth.

Without his help and power, they would be incapable of taking on
Queen
>Serenity's might. While their advances might be delayed by the
Senshi
and all of the other nuisances in this time, Emerald was
confident that
>under the Wiseman's guidance, she would deliver to Diamond
everything
he ever wanted.
>
Still sitting, as silent as ever, Black Lady looked around the
room.
>Everyone was gone. Once again, the Dark Moon Family had
disintegrated
into a group of squabbling children. This was not
what a family was
>supposed to be. She did not want them fighting amongst themselves.

Black Lady had joined with the Dark Moon Family precisely because
they
>were a family. When the Wiseman had adopted her, she thought of him
as
a wise, caring father figure.
>
He had come to her at a time when she was suffering from the
rejection
>of her own family. Everyone she knew or had loved returned that
feeling
only with scorn, hatred or indifference. Serenity and
Endymion, her
>parents from the future, did not care about her. She could remember

time and again how they had laughed at her pain and scorned her

>feelings. The Senshi were no better with the way they treated her and

mocked her incessantly.
>
Worse than how they mocked her was the way they constantly
treated her
>as a child. In everything she could remember, not once did the
Senshi
treat her as the adult she obviously was. They looked down
on her and
>she could not remember a single instance where they allowed her out
on
her own, respecting her rights and abilities as a grown adult.
When
>Wiseman suggested leaving her miserable and torturous existence,
Black
Lady had been all too happy to accept the offer of refuge.

>
Now that she had lived with the Dark Moon Family for a while,
she began
>to realise that all was not the happiness and roses that she had
been
expecting. Not all of the members of the Family got on with
each other,
>and days like today, she could feel the family bonds coming apart at

the seams. To her, it was extremely sad. This, her adopted home,
the
>source of happiness was proving to be only marginally better than
where
she had been.
>
Giving a sigh, Black Lady teleported off to her quarters. She
hoped
>that Ryoga-san, wherever he was and whatever he was doing, had a
better
family than she did. All she wanted was to be loved by
somebody.
>
* * *
>
Gently stirring her sauce, Nodoka let it simmer over a low heat
to
>evaporate the water and form a thicker, heavier dressing for the
food.
The preparation of nourishment was a pleasure she had
missed for so
>long. When just preparing for herself, Nodoka did not need to go to

extremes, but now she was cooking for her husband and son and
that made
>a world of difference.

>Dipping the tip of a spoon in her sauce, Nodoka sampled it and
smiled
with gratification. That last dash of pepper had been just
what it
>needed, the sauce was now perfect. In Nodoka's opinion, this was one
of
the great duties of any good wife. Not only did it provide
sustenance
>and enjoyment for her husband, but it was also a source of her own

enjoyment. Sighing in contentment, Nodoka wondered how much
better
>could life possibly get. Two days ago she had been alone and lonely,

wondering at the fate of her men. Now she was at a friend's place

>cooking up a feast for her son and his many paramours.

>In all likelihood, Ranma's wife would come from one of the young
women
he was consorting with at the moment. Oh, it would be such
a proud day
>when he married. That was really the culmination of her life; the

successful continuation and advancement of her family. When her
son was
>finally married, she would be able to rest content, able to savour
her
declining years by pampering many grandchildren.

>
She did have to admit that her son had interesting taste in women, and
>highly varied too. None of them are like what she was when she was

young. It would be interesting to see which of the girls he took as his
>wife and which ones as his mistresses, just to see how his taste

compared to hers.
>
In a good, properly run Japanese household, the man and his wife had
>good clearly defined roles. When people followed those roles,

prosperity and happiness followed. It was only when they deviated that
>the home would become unhappy and filled with discord. That was why she

was worried for her son; so many of his ladies were...
untraditional,
>to put it lightly.

>In an ideal world, the man would go forth and do battle, bringing home

the income and benefits for the family. Upon his shoulders would rest
>the final authority and honour of the family. In the glorious days of

Japanese history, it was always the man that went into battle and
>fought, bringing back all the spoils of war. In these more modern times,

that same man would do battle across a desk, working for the salary
>that would support his family, but the principle remained the same.

>In many ways, the woman's role had changed even less than the man's.

When he would go out and win the money, she was there to provide a
>level head and an intelligent mind to spend it. She ran the household,

prepared the food, raised the children and made the real decisions. A
>proper woman, one that would be a good role model was the guardian of

the family honour. Where the husband went out and performed the
>honourable and glorious deeds, the wife was behind him, directing him,

and providing him everything he needed to excel so that is focused mind
>was not distracted by the day-to-day world.

>Take Kasumi, for instance. A lovely girl, simply lovely. She had such

beautiful, high cheekbones, and she would look simply divine in a
>kimono. As a cook, Nodoka was willing to concede that Kasumi rivalled

her own talents. As a maintainer of house and home, Kasumi could
>achieve near miracles if half the stories she had heard about Ranma and

his friends were correct.
>
Unfortunately, Kasumi was about as forthright and demanding as a wet
>noodle. With a girl like her in charge of the household, Ranma would

surely run amok and do whatever he desired. Even on meeting her for
>just a short while, Nodoka loved Kasumi like her own daughter, but she

would not say the girl was an entirely fit wife for her son. She
>handled the money well at the markets, but she had no strength, no

direction and no leadership to run a mighty clan. That was what a woman
>needed. She needed the strength to drive her man through the

battlefield that was a modern corporate hierarchy.
>
Nodoka could not help but assess Kasumi as a perfect mistress for her
>son. She would be kind and caring for him, and she could provide a

perfect home-away-from-home for him. Her meals and compassionate nature
>would keep him coming back, and she was discrete enough to make it a

suitable long term arrangement.
>
Nabiki-chan was another matter entirely. She was far to modern for
>Nodoka's tastes. While she was a dear and had enough backbone to keep

her wayward son on track, Nodoka feared Nabiki had been polluted with
>these strange modern ideas of women in the workforce. Nabiki was a girl

Nodoka could count on to keep the Saotome clan in ascendancy, but she
>lacked the domestic spirit her sister had. However, if Nabiki was to

marry her son and carry on the leadership of their clan, Nodoka could
>not help but fear that it would be her daughter-in-law that was the

bread winner rather than her son. The poor boy had been without a

>woman's guidance for long enough. He needed someone that be able to

keep him in line.
>
Someone like Shampoo. From what little Nodoka had seen since she had
>met the girl, she was almost perfect. She could cook up a storm and

knew dozens of recipes. She was strong and forceful, a definite leader.
>From what Nodoka had heard, the girls great-grandmother had been

teaching her how to run a family already, and Nodoka could tell by the
>look in Shampoo's eyes that she wanted to be in a family way without

any hesitation.
>
Although Shampoo was lovely, with a perfect complexion and fabulous
>features, Nodoka did have one little reservation. She was a foreigner,

and you know what people say about _them_. The Saotome matriarch had
>not had a chance to sit down with Shampoo and find out her view on the

role of men and women in society, but she was already nervous. The
>Saotome line could be traced back for hundreds of years, all of them

loyal samurai, each and every one of them a Japanese of good breeding.
>If her son was to take Shampoo, he might break all of that wonderful

tradition in one fell swoop.
>
That really only left poor Ukyo. She was nice and sweet, pretty and
>well spoken. She obviously had a good head on her shoulders since she

was looking after a business of her own. When Nodoka had questioned her,
>the girl had admitted that she had only started it her so that she

could pursue Ranma. That spoke highly of both her dedication and her
>commitment.

>Ukyo was perfect in every regard but one. She was an outcast. By her

own admission, Ukyo's father had cast her out of the clan for some
>undisclosed reason. It was a shame really. She would have been

perfect
if not for that, but if her own family did not want her, how could the

>Saotome family?

>Ladling out the sauce she had been reducing into a bowl for later use,
Nodoka shook her head sadly. Her poor boy had some many lady friends,

>but none of them were quite right. What he really needed was someone
like the sister of the Kuno boy. She had been talking to him this

morning and managed to extract a fairly accurate picture of his sister
- slightly modified by sibling rivalry no doubt - but assuredly close

>nonetheless.

>Kodachi seemed to be everything her son needed. Caring to the point of
being obsessive, an enthusiastic cook who liked experimenting, and a

>girl with direction and purpose in life. Gymnastics were good for
maintaining appearance, figure and most importantly, flexibility. It

>did not hurt that the family was rich and of good heritage, a fitting
mix with the proud Saotome line.

>With a sigh, Nodoka pondered the possibility of getting a wedding

>service to introduce Ranma to Kodachi. Surely if her son had met her,
the girl would have been joining him here, but since she was not

>present, Nodoka could only assume that her son had not met the girl. It
was something to bear in mind for the future, should things not pan out

>properly with the girls she had on hand.

>As Nodoka began to dish out the rice for dinner, she wondered what the
best course was. She could let things develop naturally, but that might

>let Ranma fall in love with the wrong girl. Better by far, she could
start taking discrete actions on all of them.

>A private detective and some discrete inquiries seemed appropriate for

>Kuonji Ukyo-san. Perhaps socialisation and Japanese lessons for Shampoo,
not to mention some nice long "mother and daughter" talks.

>For the Tendo girls, there was little option. Nabiki sorely needed some

>domestication and household learning she could only get through
practice, while Kasumi needed confidence building and leadership.

>Nodoka could provide most of the training they needed, and a few select
books would do wonders for the girls' outlook on life. Perhaps she

>should also provide them some suitable reading material, just in case
one was selected for wife while the other was taken as mistress. You

>could never be too careful.

>Completing the final layout of dinner, Nodoka smiled. Cooking was so
relaxing, and you could get so much valuable thinking done at the same

>time. Privately, Nodoka thought that was why the women did the cooking
and the men did not. You would not want your husband thinking too much,

>he might start to have ideas of his own, and that just would not do.

>* * *

>It was raining as she knelt in the short grass, but Ranma did not mind.
The rain seemed poignant and appropriate to the situation, a suitable

>counterpoint to both her location and her mood. Brushing a few leaves
from the stone, Ranma made sure it was clean and presentable.

>
"Hey there, Tomboy. Long time no see."

>
Although the joke fell flat, no one aside from Ranma herself complained.

>She would have been surprised if anyone had voiced a complaint, but
these days it would not seem beyond the realms of possibility.

>
"We're winning, Akane. I know I haven't managed to do for you what I

>promised and all, but we are winning. Here, I've got an article for you.
I'll read it out."

>
Settling herself down on the grass, Ranma pulled out a newspaper

>clipping and unfolded it. The rain beat down on the cheap paper,
immediately making the ink start to blur and dissolve. Even through the

>article was short, Ranma hurried so that she could read it all to Akane
before the rain rendered it illegible.

>
"During the last two weeks, Tokyo has seen a significant turn around in

>events. Recent demon attacks, while increasing in frequency, have been
decreasing in severity. Compared to a similar period two months ago,

>the number of report assaults in a two week period has grown by an
alarming 237% percent. While someone of this can be attributed to a

>greater public recognition of the phenomenon, it is the opinion of this
editor that it is due to the recent activities of between one and four

>major groups, apparently using demons as their weapons.

>"Interestingly, the statistics on injuries and fatalities show a
distinctly different trend. Where you would normally expect both

>figures to rise in proportion with the number of attacks, the
casualties resulting from these attacks have actually been on the

>decline.

>"Approximately one month prior, the peak rate of fatal incidents
occurred. However, since then the number has undergone a steady decline.

>No one has even implied that this is due to a change of heart of the
demons plaguing our streets, although there is a growing sentiment that

>it may be due in part to a change in the nature of the super heroines
purporting to defend us. Although affected by a substantial case of

>split personality where they vacillate between devoted on one side and
deadly on the other, the girls in short skirts have undeniably cleaned

>up their act.

>"A large number of witnesses have attributed this to a greater level of
public awareness and involvement. In almost seventy percent of recent

>battles, eye witness reports have recognised the fact that ordinary

people off the street have become involved, often fighting off
the
>heroines and the demons at the same time.

>"Regardless of how things have changed, there is no question that
they
are changing. Despite this, my recommendation is that
everyone should
>stay inside at night, and try and avoid the inner city area at night
if
possible."
>
Ranma did not read out the editor's name from the bottom of the
article,
>she assumed Akane would not be interested in that. "What do ya
think,
Akane? Are we doing all right? I mean, I know we ain't got
any of the
>Senshi for you yet, but we're trying. We're keeping people alive
too,
Akane. I promised you that, and we're doing the best we
can."
>
Sniffing a few times, Ranma rubbed the rain from where it
blurred her
>eyes. Real men don't cry, Ranma knew that, so it must be that
annoying
rain getting in her eyes. Probably making her come down
with a cold too,
>since she was having a hard time talking as well.

>"I wish you could see us, Akane. We're all working together... You

ain't never seen anything like it. Even Ucchan and Shampoo are
getting
>along. Ryoga's still a jerk and all, but bacon breath seems to be
able
to control himself sometimes. At least he ain't always angry
with me. I
>guess being able to beat on the Senshi helps him calm down."

>With a big sigh, Ranma leaned forwards and rested her head on the

marker stone. Running her hand down the cold, rain-slicked
surface,
>Ranma was glad she came here alone. Damn being a man among men.
Forget
honour and being tough and strong. Akane was going to be
his wife! She
>was the woman he would have married! He could cry if he wanted
to.

>Some time later - the storm had not abated, but Ranma felt much
better
- she again opened her eyes and looked down at the plain,
unforgiving
>grey rock. "I wish you were here, Akane. Not just that I want you
here,
I mean, that would be enough, but... I know I promised you,
but
>sometimes I look at the Senshi and think... They're just girls, you

know? They're young and... and sometimes I wonder if they might
have a
>fiance or something. Someone that's gunna be hurting just like me
when
I do this.
>
"I'm not sayin' I won't do it or nothing, Akane. Don't get
angry, OK?
>All I'm sayin' is I don't gotta like it. At first... At first all I

could think about was revenge. You were gone, and there was like
this
>big... I dunno... This big empty pit in the middle of me. Like
someone
come along and chopped a big Akane sized hole, right out
of the middle
>of me. An' all I could think of doing was filling that hole with
their
pain and hurt.

>
"Sometimes... Sometimes I see the Senshi, and all I wanna do is hurt
>them. I see 'em holding a Heart Crystal or something and I figure they
killed you. Other times... Other times I see 'em on the street, and I
>think about how I would feel if you was a Senshi and if I killed you...
Does that make sense?"
>
Ranma looked up for a moment, then gave a short chuckle. "Guess it must.
>You didn't mallet me or nothing. Don't get me wrong, Akane. I know my
duty. I failed you before, but I ain't gunna fail you now. I'll get you
>those Senshi, no matter what it takes."

>Sighing, Ranma leaned over and rested on the headstone again. "They say
duty is heavier than a mountain. I never really understood that before.
>I do now. I might not wanna kill them, but I will. Because that's
what's right. I won't fail you again, Akane. I promise."
>
* * *
>
That evening as she started her patrol with Ukyo and Hotaru, Ranma felt
>remarkably relaxed. Going to see Akane had been good. Ranma had been
gone for several hours, and missed out on some important training time,
>but she felt more focused now, better in touch with who she was, and
why she was doing this.
>
Glancing from side to side at her companions, Ranma recognised that she
>was not only fighting for Akane, but also for Ukyo and Hotaru. And
every other girl and boy, man and woman out in Tokyo. She was doing it
>to keep her friends safe, and that was a duty more noble than anything
one of the Senshi could possibly hope to comprehend.

>
Revenge was a part of it, Ranma was too honest with himself to deny
>that. Unlike what it had been when he began this crusade, revenge was
no longer the only factor. For Ryoga, that might still be the case,
>Ranma was not sure. Ryoga thrived on anger, depression and thoughts of
revenge. He had kept himself motivated on those thoughts for almost a
>decade as he chased Ranma across Japan and then into China. Anyone else
would have faltered, but Ryoga continued out of sheer bloody mindedness.
>
That sort of myopic drive worked fine for Ryoga - and even Ukyo had
>hunted Ranma and his father for over a decade - but Ranma was a
different person. There was no question that he was willing, able and
>determined to avenge his fiancée, but he needed more in his life than
that. All of Ranma's life he had been taught that martial arts was
>about defending yourself and protecting the weak. To suddenly change
that over to an unmitigated assault with no recourse did not sit well
>with him and he could not maintain the mindset indefinitely.

>Instead, Ranma had evolved his objectives into something larger and
more noble, more in keeping with the way he was raised. No longer

did

>he come out her night after night solely for revenge. Now he came here
to defend, to protect, and to serve Akane's memory the way he should

>have served her in life.

>"Hey, Ucchan, who do you think we're going to meet tonight?"

>"Well, if Nabiki was asking, I would say the Death Busters. That's
where my money would be riding tonight. How about you, Ranchan? Where's

>your money sitting?"

>Looking from side to side as she continued to jog along with Hotaru
riding on her shoulders, Ranma was fairly indifferent. "Not sure... I'm

>thinking Dark Moon Family. Something tells me this is going to be their
night."

>
"Sailor Senshi!" Came a voice from above them.

>
Ukyo shrugged. "Could be right, Hotaru-chan. I still think it's going

>to be the Death Busters though. Just call it women's intuition, I
guess."

>
"No, I mean I saw Sailor Senshi. Over there."

>
Looking where Hotaru pointed, Ranma and Ukyo realised she must have

>seen them as they were passing a cross street. Lifting the small
magical girl off her shoulders, Ranma gave the pair of real girls a

>determined grin. "Let's not keep them waiting, then! Come on, guys.
We've got lives to save."

>
Going at a jog so that Hotaru could keep up, Ranma found herself

>grinning like an idiot. Of all their enemies, Ranma was finding she
enjoyed fighting the Sailor Senshi the most. Fighting a Daimon or Droid

>was good since you could go all out and know that it was just a monster,
but there was something special about fighting a real, human opponent.

>
She did not fancy the idea of killing them - indeed her mind shied away

>from that whenever possible - but fighting people was what she had been
raised to do. Fighting that Sailor in the green skirt, that was what

>martial arts was all about. Although Sailor Jupiter was not as skilled
as him, he could tell she far from a novice, and when that skill was

>combined with the magic of the Senshi, she became a formidable foe
indeed. She was also a formidable foe that fought in the same manner

>that he did: hand-to-hand.

>Most of the monsters or Senshi they fought preferred to try and use
their magical attacks on Ranma, since they knew they could not match

>the lightning fast redhead in close combat. Jupiter on the other hand,
could match Ranma. Ranma knew she would win in the end, and that would

>be the last day Sailor Jupiter lived unless her friends stepped in, but
in the meantime Ranma thrived on the challenge. Jupiter was an enemy

>she could respect and Jupiter in turn respected Ranma. That made the
fight all the more interesting, and the prize all the more worth

>winning.

>Smirking in pleasure, Ranma cracked her knuckles. Perversely, ever

since she had started fighting Sailor Jupiter, Ranma had found it

>increasingly difficult to use the Shi Shi Hokodan. A bit of a pain
when
fighting Daimons, but up close and personal against the
particular

>Senshi in question, it did not matter.

>Emerging from the cross street, they trio found themselves behind
the
Senshi as the five girls stood around looking at a couple of
boys lying

>on the ground. With a growl, Ukyo unsheathed her spatula and hefted
it
into position.

>
"I'll take the ones on the left, Ranchan. You get the ones on
the right.

>Hotaru-chan? Do you think you can try and get those boys out of
there?"

>Without waiting for an answer Ukyo dashed forwards and brained the

Senshi's leader with the flat of her spatula. Caught by surprise,

>Sailor Moon did not even utter a sound as she crumpled under the
thick
metal plate. As much as Ukyo would have liked to take the
extra moments

>necessary to finish the job properly, she did not hesitate as swung
her
battle spatula to the left, brutally cracking it against the
arm of

>Sailor Mercury.

>The blue haired Senshi screamed in pain, but by then there was more

than enough noise to go around. Even at the speed that Ukyo
struck, she

>was not up to matching a group of Senshi, and it was only moments

before she found herself on the defensive. With Ranma dodging
around

>and irritating three of the Senshi on the right to keep them
occupied
the pseudo-girl was taking a beating. Most importantly,
she allowed

>Ukyo to concentrate on Sailor Mercury and try to continue her
winning
streak.

>
Slicing the air with ease that came from long years of gruelling

>practice, Ukyo was ripping shreds from the timid Senshi's uniform.
She
had not managed to hurt the girl greatly other than her
initial strike,

>but it was only a matter of time. As long as the Senshi remained
purely
on the defensive, incapable or unwilling to effectively
engage in hand

>to hand, Ukyo was certain to win.

>Certain, that was, until Sailor Moon's advisor chose that time to
check
on her fallen charge. None of Ranma's friends had seen the
cats speak

>before, and currently they were too busy to notice as the small
white
cat gently patted Sailor Moon's face and tried to wake her
up. Luna

>knew how difficult it could be to wake the girl before school, but
this
was completely different. Moon's friends were in a fight,
and Mercury

>was in serious danger. Just as important, Sailor Saturn was here,

walking straight through the middle of the fighting girls to
carry the

>two boys out of danger.

>Saturn and her friends may not have seen how the Senshi had defeated
a
Daimon and saved the boys, which could explain why they
attacked them
>if Ami's analysis was right, and Luna had no reason to doubt the
genius.
Seeing Saturn act with such unexpected compassion to the
fallen boys
>was something that stirred Luna's heart, removing any last doubts
about
Ami's assertions on her change of personality. In the
Silver Millennium
>Sailor Saturn would not have cared if the two boys were ground

underfoot by the fighters. In her world view, if the problem was
big
>enough to warrant her power, she would destroy it. Otherwise, it was

not her problem and she did not care.
>
Luna had only been trying to wake Sailor Moon for a few moments
when a
>terrified call of "CAT" echoed across the street. Looking up, Luna
was
just in time to see the redhead - who had been staring at her
with wide
>eyes - get belted in the jaw by Sailor Jupiter and knocked into a

telephone pole.
>
Landing on her bottom, the girl adopted the most frightened
expression
>Luna had ever seen short of Sailor Moon's first venture against the

Dark Kingdom. Showing her trademark resilience, the girl got back
to
>her feet as she rubbed her jaw and shook her head trying to clear
it.
While she was obviously focused on the three Senshi she had
attacked,
>there was no doubt that she kept a keen eye on Luna.

>"C-Come and get me, scumbags. Let's see what you're made of."

>Jupiter started forwards, eager as always to meet a challenge. After

the tall girl had taken less than a step, Mars held out her arm
to bar
>her way. Flicking her eyes over to Luna for a moment, Mars spoke in
a
voice that was more confident than she felt.
>
"No. You attacked us. Why don't you come over here?"

>
Ranma too looked at the cat, swallowed once, then spoke with
matching
>conviction. "Hey, it don't matter to me, you're going down either
way."

>Moving carefully to her right Ranma circled around the Senshi,
working
to place them between herself and the cat. It irritated
her no end that
>she could fight three such powerful girls without the slightest

hesitation, but she quivered in fright at the sight of an animal
most
>people considered harmless. Cursing her father under breath, Ranma

tried to remain focused on the Senshi and ignore the frightened

>pounding of her heart.

>She had almost succeeded when she heard the horrible cry from the
black
cat. Shaking herself from her head to her feet, Ranma
grappled with her
>inner fears and did not back away. She did cease moving forwards,
and
she could see the Senshi were beginning to cotton on that
there was

>something wrong.

>Luna stepped forwards and spoke again. "Miya!" Closer this time, she

could see that way the redhead jumped slightly and her eyes
widened.

>Luna did not like to pretend to be an ordinary cat, but for this
sort
of reaction, she was willing to put aside her pride for a
while.

>
Watching as Luna took one step forward and the redhead took one
step

>back to match, Sailor Venus shook her pretty head. "I don't believe

this. It's just not possible. Hey, Artemis! Get your furry little
body

>over here! Time for you to be a hero."

>Gritting her teeth, Ranma struggled against running as a second cat

appeared. This one was white, but otherwise identical to the
black

>monster already harassing her. In a moment of frightened clarity,
Ranma
saw that both of the cats had even been tattooed with the
crescent moon

>motif that the Senshi's leader was so taken with. That insignificant

fact did nothing to help, as the cats continued to advance,
backing

>Ranma up against a wall.

>As their two advisors cornered their otherwise undefeated opponent,
the
three Senshi shook their heads in amazement. The girl was a
whirlwind

>in battle, as tough and determined as any of the Senshi, but she was

running scared from a couple of little cats. Under less serious

>circumstances they might have laughed at the sight; for now they had

other things to worry about and decided to take advantage of the

>unexpected boon without questioning it.

>"You two go get Saturn, make sure she doesn't get away until we have
a
chance to talk to her. I'm going to go and teach that other
girl not to

>mess with Sailor Moon and the Sailor Senshi!" Mars ground other
through
gritted teeth, a snarl of anger covering her face. Now
that she was not

>fighting for her life, her anger at the way they had been attacked
from
behind, and her intense resentment of anyone who would knock
out Sailor

>Moon rose to the surface, making her blood boil like the god of war
she
represented.

>
The brown haired girl was too close to Mercury to allow Mars to
safely

>use her fire, but there was nothing stopping the forth planet's
Senshi
from closing in and attacking the girl from behind, the
same way she

>had treated Sailor Moon. When Mars was close enough to strike, she

found out the difference between magically boosted speed and the
speed

>that came through intense training: training provided experience at
the
same time.

>
Mars' white gloved fist sailed in with enough strength behind it
to

>shatter a concrete wall, more than enough to knock the girl
unconscious
if it hit. Since Mercury was taking such a beating at
the time, Mars

>had assumed she was unobserved, but that was not the case. Moments

before the deadly fist impacted the back of her skull, Ukyo turned and
>dropped. She momentarily exposed her back to Mercury, but that Senshi
was too thoroughly on the defensive to take advantage of the window of
>opportunity. Most importantly, it allowed Ukyo to interpose the flat of
her battle spatula in the path of Mars' fist, and a centimetre thick
>plate of hardened steel is a lot less friendly to punch than a person.

>With a sound reminiscent of a blacksmith's anvil being struck to work
cold iron, Mars left a fist sized dent into the steel. Although the
>spatula managed to block the blow and Ukyo's arms were able to take the
majority of the force, the rapid defence was unable to match the power
>of the strike. With much of the speed abated, Ukyo's spatula was forced
back by the punch, striking Ukyo cleanly in the face and rocking back
>on her heels and her eyes momentarily crossed and the world span.

>For two long seconds the three combatants stood there, each trying to
adjust to their new world of pain. Mercury was pulling herself together
>now that she had a moment's calm and some support. Her clinical brain
was detachedly telling her sore body that there was nothing seriously
>wrong with it, and it should be ready to charge into the fray. The body
was not entirely sure of this, sending back countless pain signals, but
>it obeyed, and the Senshi in the torn and damaged blue skirt braced
herself into a stance allowing her to move or fire off her ice should
>to opportunity present itself. The Senshi did not have the martial
artists' experience, but they were quickly picking up the basics.

>
Mars was waving her right hand frantically while dancing a little jig
>and saying "Ow! Ow! Ow!" Nothing was broken, but after striking the
steel plate, she felt as though all her fingers should be nothing more
>than crumbled bone fragments and bruised flesh. Even that pain was
momentary, and as Mercury and Ukyo readied themselves, Mars was
>tenderly flexing her fingers, getting ready to try again. This time,
she vowed, she would hit the girl, not the metal.
>
Shaking the cobwebs out of her head, Ukyo looked down at her damaged
>spatula and frowned. For ten years she had kept the same spatula while
she was training for her revenge against Ranma. Since meeting him, she
>needed to replace it at least once a month as someone managed to damage
it beyond repair. Since mixing it up with the Senshi, that had
>increased to once a week. Given the specialisation of her families
school of Okonomiyaki based martial arts, five foot long battle
>spatulas were not easy or cheap to come by. Frowning, Ukyo held her
weapon in a defensive cross-body position and looked at the girl with

>long black hair that had just ruined her latest weapon.

>"You're going to pay for that! And I'm going to take the coin right out
of your skin."

>
Mars smiled back in return. "I don't think so, not with two of us here

>now. I'm the one that's going to make _you_ pay for what you did to
Sailor Moon."

>
Energy attacks temporarily forgotten in the desire to beat up the

>bigger girl, Mars closed and was soon joined by Mercury. As good as she
was, Ukyo did not stand a chance against two Senshi, and it quickly

>began to show.

>Off to the other side of the street, Venus and Jupiter were advancing
on Sailor Saturn. The little girl had dragged the two boys the Senshi

>had been standing over off to the side of the road, grateful for the
enhanced capabilities of her magical girl form. Hotaru knew that she

>was not as strong as Ranma-san, but while she was like this, she was
more than capable of pulling an unresisting young man across the ground

>so he could be safe under the awing of a building while he recovered.

>While the boys might be safe, Hotaru could not say the same for herself.
Before her eyes, two of the terrible Senshi were advancing on her,

>cruel smiles adorning their faces. Hotaru's eyes flashed to either side
frantically, desperately seeking someone who could help her out of this

>bind. She had seen the Senshi in action before and knew that as soon as
she tried to fly out of their clutches, they would blast her down with

>their magic.

>As she took another step backwards and felt cool, hard bricks against
her wings, the youngest Senshi realised that running away was equally

>out of the question. She could not run, nor could she fly away. Poor
Ukyo-san was being attacked by two of the horrible girls, and they

>looked like they were really starting to hurt her.

>Ranma-san... Ranma-san was even in worse shape. They must have cast
some sort of horrible spell on her, that was the only explanation

>Hotaru could think of. Poor Ranma-san was half crouched, quivering
against the side of the street, backed up against a different building

>completely terrified. Hotaru knew that it must have been one of the
evil Senshi's rotten spells, since Ranma-san was never afraid of

>anything. Nothing, particularly not a pair of cute little cats, could
scare Ranma-san. She was sure of that.

>
If she had been up against the same building as her hero, Hotaru would

>have tried to edge her way towards the pig-tailed martial artist in the
hopes of helping her. Unfortunately, she was on the opposite side of

>the road, and she did not think the Senshi would let her get past.

She
was sure they were going to try and do something nasty to her; they
>always had in the past.

>She could not run, nor could she get help and that left only one

option: fight. She might have been tempted to erect her Silence Wall,
>but that would gain her nothing, all that it would do was let poor

Ukyo-san get beaten to death while she was stuck there. If she was
>going to escape and help her friends, she would need to hurt the Senshi,
and there was really only one way she could do that.

>
Getting a good grip on her Glaive Hotaru the magical girl put on the
fiercest face that she could manage - looking almost as mean as an

angry two week old puppy - and braced herself. "If you don't all go
>away and leave my friends alone, I'm going to make you so sorry."

>For a moment the two Senshi faltered in their stride, nervousness

showing over their faces. 'So they should be', Hotaru thought. 'I'm the
>most powerful magical girl in the whole world. I could blow everything
up if I wanted to. They should be running away they're so frightened of
>me.'

>The blonde Senshi turned to her taller companion and gave a nervous

smile. "Well... Mercury's never been wrong before. I guess we just have
>to give it a try."

>"You're right... Err... What do you say to a really angry little girl
that could kill everyone on the planet?" The brown haired Senshi was
>more intimidating because of her height, but she did not act any more
confidently than her shorter companion.
>
"I don't know, but whatever you say, you say it very politely." Venus
>flashed her friend a sunny smile then turned back to Hotaru. "Please,
we just want to talk to you for a while."
>
The black haired girl in the sailor suit looked confused and highly
>doubtful. "You want to talk?"

>"That's right. I'm not sure what these people have told you, but we're
not really the bad guys. We want to be your friends."

>
Saturn looked even more nervous. "No you don't, you attacked me. You
>all keep trying to hurt me."

>"No, no, no." Venus began quickly. She wished Sailor Moon was with them.
The Moon Senshi always knew what to say to make friends with new people,
>or to try and placate people who were their enemies. She could feel in
her heart that Sailor Saturn did not want to hurt them, but she plainly
>did not trust them either. "That was all a big mistake. Really. We
didn't understand who you were then."
>
"No?" Hotaru began hesitantly. "How do you know who I am now?"

>
"See those cats? They're really magical cats. They told us all about

>you. They explained how you were really one of the Sailor Senshi, how
you were one of our team. Well, now we want to say we're sorry and make
>you one of the Senshi. Wouldn't you like that? You could join us and

fight beside us. We'd take care of you, and you would never have to
>worry about anything again. You'd be a part of our team."

>Hotaru's eyes grew to the size of dinner plates as everything fell into
place. They wanted to take over her mind just like Kaolinite had taken
>over her father's mind, and then he wanted to do the same to her. That
was why those cats were hurting Ranma-san. They knew she was so
>powerful, and they were probably trying to break her mind right now,
trying to make Ranma-san into one of the evil Sailor Senshi too.

>
These girls hard refrained from attacking her because they wanted to
>try and take her easily and wipe out her mind, not because they wanted
to be her friends. She couldn't trust them. Worse than that, she had to
>get free of them before they managed to completely take over Ranma-san.
If he... If he became one of the Sailor Senshi, Hotaru did not know
>what she would do...
>Only scant seconds had passed between Venus' encouraging words and
Hotaru's realisation of what they meant. To the watching Senshi, a
>gamut of emotions ran across the small girl's face, before settling
into one of the strongest expressions of anger they had seen on anyone
>since they had watched Sailor Moon fight off Beryl.
>"I'll kill you!" Shouted Hotaru followed by a wordless scream of rage.
>Propelled by her anger, Hotaru attacked the Senshi in the only way she
could. She could not use any of her magical attacks in the middle of
>the city, and since she was facing her friends, they would be doomed
too. That only left her with her Silence Glaive, since she was well
>aware for watching Ranma's friends that she did not have the fighting
skill to be able to attack the two girls barehanded.

>
So surprised by the move, Venus was almost skewered by the point of the
>Silence Glaive. Only a last minute skip to the side saved her from
being disembowelled, but she still received a nasty cut on the left
>side of her stomach. While the Senshi in the orange skirt stumbled to
the side trying to recover her balance, Hotaru continued her attack,
>reaching out again and again, desperately trying to impale the tall
girl.
>
Sailor Jupiter was more on the ball that Venus had been and she deftly
>avoided the strike, parrying the follow-up while she checked on her
team mate. "Venus! Are you OK?"
>
The girl clutched her side and hissed between clenched teeth as she

>took stock. "Y-Yeah... I'm fine. But what did I say?"

>"I've got no idea, but if Saturn doesn't stop trying to make be into
a
shish kebab, I'm going to take her toys away from her, no
matter what
>Sailor Moon says about being nice to her." As she spoke, Jupiter

continued to fend off the attacks.
>
Sailor Saturn's thrusts may have been accelerated by her Senshi
power
>and they were backed by the strength of her anger and magic, but she

was no match for Sailor Jupiter. Jupiter's years of fighting
experience
>combined with additional years of growth allowed her to far outmatch

the sickly magical girl. Despite this, Hotaru presented a very
real
>danger, because the second that Jupiter dropped her guard or became

distracted, it could well become her last.
>
When Hotaru finally managed to snag one of Jupiter's gloves,
leaving a
>thin red line of blood visible through the tear, Jupiter lost all

patience. On the next strike, Jupiter side stepped the weapon's

>business end and grabbed it close to her body. Hotaru's strength was

nowhere near sufficient as she tugged and tugged on the weapon,

>valiantly trying to reclaim it. "Sailor Venus. I'll hold this. You
try
and do something about her."
>
"Right!" Smiling confidently again, Sailor Venus began a slow
advance
>on the small girl, hands open wide in a placating manner. The whole

while as she slowly walked, Venus spoke softly and gently, trying
to
>soothe the girl. These efforts only drove Hotaru to more and more

frantic efforts, as she was convinced that the Senshi was closing
in to
>take her mind away, in almost the exact same manner her father had

acted.
>
Venus had almost reached her goal when all hell broke lose.

>
When Luna and Artemis had first come forwards, Ranma had felt as
though
>her worst nightmares had just come true. Here she was, stuck in the

middle of a battle and her only weakness was about to be
exploited.
>Trained cats. Who would have believed it? How do you train a cat to

hold someone prisoner like these two were? Ranma shuddered just

>thinking of the idea.

>All too quickly the cats had backed her up against a wall, boxing
her
in. She knew from looking earlier that the building was only
a couple
>of stories high. It was nothing that she could not jump on a normal
day,
but now was hardly normal. Even assuming the trained attack
cats would
>leave her alone long enough, Ranma did not think she could muster
the
concentration needed to make the jump. Currently it was all
she could
>manage to hold her self erect and keep her knees from giving out.

>The white cat took a step forward, a cruel grin plastered all over
its
evil feline face. Ranma felt her knees turn to water and she

slumped to
>the ground. Given the opportunity initially, Ranma may have run

screaming from the scene, but the situations that Ukyo and Hotaru
were
>in had held her here. As the white cat took another step towards her

crouching form, Ranma felt a terrified gibbering part of her
brain
>saying how it would be all right to run, all right to flee. Every
other
part of Ranma's mind jumped on this thought and killed it
in formation
>- every part of her aside from the roaring cat that was rattling its

cage in the back of her head, the cat wanted to be free and wreck
havoc
>on its enemies.

>Tears of fear and frustration coursed down her face, and Ranma

subconsciously curled into a foetal ball when a pair of "miya"'s
rent
>the air. Within her head, the cat tried to free itself. The
ferocious
beast had taken up residence when Ranma first learnt
the cat-fist so
>many years ago. It was the embodiment of the vicious nature he had

learned from the cat's fighting technique, and whenever it came
across
>other cats, the monster in his head wanted to come out and play or

fight.
>
That cat was the Neko-Ken. It was the so-called ultimate
fighting
>technique that gave her immense speed and strength coupled with
Ki-
based claws capable of cleaving through steel, wood or water
with equal
>ease. It was also a totally mindless beast, incapable of rational

thought. It hungered, it played and it fought. The animal in her
skull
>was not a martial artist, it was a killer, nothing more. To Ranma, a

martial artist whose entire life had been based around attaining

>perfect control of her body and environment, the cat in her mind was

itself as much to fear as the cats who drew it to the surface.

>
When the white cat advanced further until it was almost touching
her,
>the black cat was almost beside it, Ranma was shaking, only moments

away from surrendering to the peaceful bliss of oblivion. It
would be
>so easy to give in. So easy to let the cat free, to embrace the
Neko-
Ken and end his torment as she had in the past. When she
could not
>escape his fear, eventually all her will power crumbled as the cat

broke free, making her trained martial artist's body into nothing
more
>that an oversized cat that lacked fur.

>This time... This time she could not do that. If Ranma gave into the

Neko-Ken she would be useless to Ukyo and Hotaru. She knew from
Akane
>and Cologne's reports in the past that she could expect her cat form
to
put the Senshi at serious risk while it fought them. With the
power and
>speed increase that it provided, she may well even be able to defeat

one or two of them.
>
Unfortunately the cat was irrational and short-sighted. If the

Senshi

>backed off or retreated even for a minute, she would relax, licking her
paws and cleaning her wounds. She would be oblivious to any

>preparations they made until they overtly moved against her. Even worse,
while Ranma expected that her cat mind would recognise Ukyo and Hotaru

>as friends and not hurt them; she had no guarantees that the cat would
follow them home, rather than sitting on the street and providing a

>nice, juicy target for enraged magical girls.

>No... The cat was too simple minded to fight the Senshi. It did not
understand magic. It did not understand that a group of girls could

>stand around halfway down the street and fire off a volley of magic
that it could never possibly avoid or survive. To give into the cat

>against the Senshi would probably doom herself, and maybe even her
friends.

>
Despite her best intentions, Ranma could do nothing while being penned

>up by the small furry creatures. All her effort, all her will power was
focused solely upon keeping herself sane, upon the faint hope that

>maybe the cats would go away long enough or far enough that she could
recover and go to aid Ukyo and Hotaru.

>
Dimly, as though seen from a great distance, Ranma was aware of her

>friend's worsening plight. Ukyo was now on the ground only twitching as
the Senshi with the long black hair kicked her. Hotaru was against the

>wall, her terror obvious even in Ranma's state.

>She needed control! She needed to surpass the fear that held her
prisoner. If only she could beat the fear, to lift the curse that had

>been upon her ever since her stupid father had taught her that useless
technique. Intellectually, she knew that there was nothing to fear but

>fear itself, but that went scant distance to abate the roaring,
slavering beast that rattled the foundations of her mind and threatened

>to bring the whole of structured thought crashing to the ground.

>Fear; that had been, is, and will be the key. Fear, terror, and the
horror that came with knowing the Neko-ken. Fear was the key.

Fear was

>the mind killer, the enemy of rational thought.

>For a moment, Ranma remembered a Sensei she had seen when she was about
seven. At that time, her father had still been trying to cure her of

>her phobia to improve the cat-fist, but nothing had worked. That one
particular Sensei stood out in her mind now. He was a short man, only

>around Happosai's height, but with none of his perversions. A slow
moving, diligent and intelligent Sensei, the man had always advocated

>much more meditation and soul searching that Genma had permitted.

>"Fear..." That was what the teacher had been obsessed with. Under the
small man's world view, fear was the root of all problems.

Fear was

>what caused all the problems in the world. Her Senshi had feared no one.
The man had respected people's ability and the danger they presented,

>but he did not fear them. It was much the same way that a snake handler
respected the snakes, but did not fear them.

>
"Fear leads to hatred, hatred leads to anger, anger... leads to

>violence..."

>That was the man's creed. Do not fear someone, because your fear will
lead you to irrational acts, and those acts will eventually hurt you as

>much they may hurt your enemies. Fear, hatred, anger. These were all
the emotions that a martial artist should purge from their souls to

>maintain a perfect control.

>To maintain perfect control...

>Even in her tormented state, Ranma's remarkable mind caught that and
tumbled it around. School or lectures never managed to catch and hold

>Ranma's attention, but even under the most dire circumstances, her mind
was like a super-computer analysing and dissecting anything to do with

>martial arts and taking it to the next level.

>The absence of those negative emotions was what led to perfect control.
Akane and Ryoga were perfect examples of that.

Distracted by anger,

>neither of them could match Ranma's ability in a fight. That was
because Ranma always kept cool and focused. She could maintain that

>perfect control.

>However there was no denying that Ryoga was a devastating martial
artist. Nor was there any way that Ranma could deny she was currently

>worse than useless in her terrified state. That was what maintaining
control was doing to her. It was rendering her incapable of anything.

>
Perhaps that was what the Sensei had been trying to teach her in a

>round about fashion. That was what she needed to grasp. Where fear can
be conquered, keep your head and be unbeatable. When the fear was more

>than you could overcome, do not try to fight it. Bend like the reed in
a hurricane, not break like the oak. Embrace the fear. Become one with

>it. Learn to live with the fear and make it a part of you.

>"Fear leads to hatred..."

>Ranma's small form began to shake, small, violent tremors rattling her
narrow shoulders. Under lowered brows, Ranma's eyes smouldered. She

>could not stand cats. They were horrible, disgusting creatures. Cats
were the cause of all pain and suffering in the world. They hurt her,

>and they were causing her friends to be hurt.

>"Hatred leads to anger..."

>Ranma's small hands curled into fists, taking small chunks of concrete
with them as the fingers curled through the pavement. Cats were the

>enemies of all mankind. She would be doing the world a favour. She

should kill them, hurt them, make them suffer like they had caused
>countless others to suffer. She would rip, shred and destroy. She would
kill them all!
>
"Anger leads to violence..."
>
Coinciding almost perfectly, Ranma heard Hotaru give a small terrified
>scream, the final catalyst in her mantra. With a ferocious yell of

anger that shook windows all down the street, Ranma surged to her feet,
>her fists dimly showing a set of Ki claws extending from between each
knuckle. A single strike to the pavement as she surged past sent rock
>and cats flying. As much as Ranma's anger dominated her, she embraced
it and directed it. This was not the mindless violence of the cat that
>lived in her skull. This was the unbridled anger that Ranma had learned
to keep bottled up every day of his life.
>
Running past the cats that were the focus of her anger, Ranma charged
>the viscous Senshi that was hurting her oldest friend. Arm wide with a
strike that would cleave the girl in two, Ranma had a fierce grin
>plastered across her face. Now she understood why Ryoga gave into his
anger so quickly and easily. There was a freedom and power in that
>state she had never felt before. Extending her claws to the width of

the girl's back, Ranma narrowed her eyes against the anticipated spray
>of blood and gore that would inevitably come.

>There was a scream and the faint tugging of her claws slicing through
something, but it was less that she expected. With a snort, Ranma
>realised that while her anger had freed her to act, her control and
focus was lacking. It did not matter though. At the last moment, the
>quiet, blue haired Senshi had tackled her friend, knocking her out of
the way. Ranma's claws had opened up the girl's shoulder and tricep
>deeply and blood was flowing freely, but both of them still lived.

>Hesitating for a precious second, Ranma considered closing in a
finishing off the pair of them. Sailor Mercury was clearly in shock,
>and from her position on top of the other girl, Ranma knew she could
finish off Mars if she wanted to. With everything covered in the red
>haze of anger, Ranma considered it. She wanted to, it was what she was
here for. It was what needed to be done, but it could wait a moment.
>For now, Hotaru was in danger, and every second might be vital to
saving her life.
>
Spinning on her toes, Ranma lunged down the street, fully intent on
>eviscerating a pair of girls as they harassed her friend. Unlike Sailor
Mars, these girls had received the precious time they needed to prepare.
>When Sailor Venus sent a golden beam of energy at her, Ranma dodged.

That movement had been enough to allow Jupiter in turn to evade her own

>wild strike and deliver a kick as she passed.

>Ranma avoided the hasty kick and lashed backwards, trying to remove the
leg at the knee. Again Jupiter was too quick to be taken out so easily,
>as again Ranma had to modify her attack, this time to defend against a
snaking chain of love hearts coming from the Senshi in orange.

>
As Ranma switched targets, deciding to go after the weaker girl first,
>she dimly noticed Hotaru running behind her, Silence Glaive returned to
wherever the girl placed it between battles. Venus might not have
>Sailor Jupiter's years of fighting experience, but she was an
experienced fighter in her own right, having fought the Dark Kingdom
>and assorted criminals during her fledgling Sailor V days back in
England. That had given her experience fighting multiple opponents, and
>while Ranma was only one person, she moved like she was three people at
once, and was as dangerous as ten men. Ten _big_ men.

>
Slash after slash arced at Sailor Venus, and it was all she could to
>retreat fast enough to retain all her body parts. Several street signs
and a garbage can fell to Ranma's careless attacks, turned into slivers
>with no effort or notice. With her attention focused on Venus to the
exclusion of all else, she was making progress like never before. The
>girl was quickly covered in nicks and scratches, a testament to the
Senshi's ability to dodge and survive. None were fatal, but the would
>soon add up.

>Not even the addition of the revitalised Sailors Mars and Jupiter was
enough to stop Ranma. Blows that should have sent her reeling were
>shrugged off as adrenaline and anger ran her body past all of its
limits. The crunch of a breaking rib would have been enough to take
>almost any fighter in the world out of a battle, but in her fixated
state, Ranma did not even stop to gasp in pain. All she did was return
>Mars' present with her own blow. The pretty soldier was marginally too
slow to avoid it, and the side of her fuku was stained red with blood,
>causing the girl to step back and clamp a hand to her wound.

>Ranma smiled and advanced. She could smell blood. She could smell
victory. Mars would go down now, and all too soon Venus would follow.
>Left by herself, Sailor Jupiter would also fall before Ranma in her
modified Neko-Ken state. Sailor Mars was injured and slowed, and Ranma
>could smell the girl's defeat and demise in the air. She could also
smell ozone...
>
On another day, that might have been enough to tip her off, but in her
>hyper-excited state the implications went straight past her. Not so the
lighting. Caught full in the back, Ranma was thrown past Sailor Mars,

>body convulsing for long, painful seconds as electricity arced and

sparked over her whole body.

>
When under the grip of the normal Neko-Ken, many things were
able to

>release Ranma. Primary amongst these was rest, sleep and a feeling
of
security, which allowed her deranged mind to settle. Other
shocks to

>her system such as her physical transformation also worked. While
she
had never tried grasping a pair of 33KV power lines to find
out if that

>would cure her, Jupiter's lightning proved to be a sufficient
example.

>Lying on the ground, twitching slightly and smoking a lot, Ranma

blinked several times and tried to breathe. Even that much was
hard. She

>hurt all over, and if she ever moved again, it would be too soon.

Released from her fear-embracing version of the Neko-Ken, Ranma's

>activities came back on her full force, requiring immediate payment
for
the demands she had placed on her merely mortal body. One
mistake, and

>the Senshi had her. She had hurt them like never before and come
closer
to her goals than previous battles, but that one little
slip and she

>was history. The way she felt now, even the heavily wounded Sailor

Mercury would be able to finish her off.

>
She was still hardly able to move, and definitely incapable of
fighting

>when a pair of blue booted feet stopped by her head. 'How poetic',
she
thought. 'Think of the devil, and he would come. Same seems
to be true

>of those blasted Senshi.'

>Strong hands - too tiny to possibly have the strength they possessed
-
reached under her shoulders and started to lift her. "Come on,
Ranma-

>san! We have to get out of here!"

>Warmth flooded through Ranma's back, spreading out to her limbs as

Hotaru's healing energy infused into her. The treatment was far
to

>brief to knit bonds or heal mauled flesh, but it did calm the
twitching
that infected her. Muscles locked by spasms relaxed as
electricity was

>forced from her over-driven nerves and control re-exerted itself
over
her limbs. Ranma still hurt all over. It hurt to simply
move. Failing

>to move would hurt even more shortly, so she rose to her feet,
leaning
heavily on Hotaru. Hotaru in turn leaned on her Silence
Glaive looking

>more pale and weak than Ranma could ever remember seeing her.

>"I... I put Ukyo-san around the corner. We have to get away! We have
to
get away from them. Can you walk? Can you move, Ranma-san?"

>
Forcing a smile to her lips only made Ranma hurt even more, but
she did

>it anyway. "I'll do whatever it takes."

>Hotaru managed to take a couple of steps before her knees gave way.

Ranma caught her, and the pair moved down the street at barely
walking

>pace, each supporting the other. As they passed the corner of the

building, Ukyo showed herself to also be standing, another recipient of
>Hotaru's healing energies. Placing herself under Ranma's other arm, she
helped the pair escape as much as they helped her.
>
As they moved, Ranma spared a backwards glance to the Senshi. At the
>speed they were going, there was no way that the deadly girls could

have missed them. If they wanted to, the Senshi could have thrown

>attack after attack at them, and they would not have stood a chance.

What she saw amazed her so that she stumbled and almost fell again.

>
Sailor Moon was finally standing again, and she had interposed herself

>between the martial artists and the other Senshi. Although Mars and

Mercury were clutching their wounds in pain, Moon's eyes seemed sad for

>reasons beyond that. For a long second before the trio rounded a corner
and made their escape, Sailor Moon caught Ranma's eyes and silently

>communicated something to him.

>"We could have continued." She seemed to say. "We didn't. We could have,
but we let you go. Remember that."

>
Then Moon turned away from the red-haired girl and concentrated on

>Sailor Mercury's wounds. Two major muscles were seriously cut, and the
Senshi concentrated on her own healing magic as the combatants finally

>disappeared from each other's view.

>* * *

>The night was dark, with only a thin sliver of streetlight filtering
through Kasumi's blinds where they did not quite meet properly in the

>middle. Hotaru had been put to bed almost as soon as she had come home.
Physically exhausted by her fight against the Senshi and then further

>drained by her work healing Ukyo and Ranma, the girl fainted once they
finally entered the Tendo compound and they were safe.

>
None of the other teams that had gone out that night had suffered the

>way that Ranma and his friends had. That was fortunate, since Ukyo and
Ranma required all of Kasumi's attention and available medical supplies.

>Even Cologne had been given a late night call at the Nekohanten to come
and assist. The old woman had been only too happy to help her Son-In-

>Law, glad for the opportunity to earn his trust and friendship. With
Akane gone, Cologne viewed the whole fiancée game as a long term battle.

>The girl who was there for Ranma the longest and whom could offer him
the most would win, and she intended that to be Shampoo.

>
Cologne's subtle machinations did not impact on the sleeping Hotaru in

>the least. Kasumi had carried her upstairs, gave her a quick bath and
put her to bed. The girl deserved a good rest after her heroic efforts,

>and Kasumi knew that she would be treating Ranma and Ukyo in the same
way shortly.

>
As a cloud moved across the night sky, the moon was revealed, and a
>pale line of light rested upon Hotaru's features. Her nose gave a faint
twitch, then her eyes sprang open. In a series of jerky movements, the
>small girl moved her eyes, looking around the ceiling, trying to

determine where she was.
>
"This must be Kasumi's room." She thought.

>
Experimentally, the girl tried to move a hand then a leg, but nothing
>responded. Breathing deeply, the eyes closed and the small girl

concentrated. Slowly, with great effort, the head rolled to the side,
>spilling dark hair onto the pillow.

>When her eyes opened again, the girl could see that she was lying in

Kasumi's bed. Obviously the older girl had decided that Hotaru deserved
>a good nights sleep, and since she could not object to the trade,

Kasumi took the futon on the floor while Hotaru slept in the

>comfortable bed.

>Small lips parted and a few sighs came out, but nothing that resembled
speech. It was still too soon for that. Tomoe Souichi may have lost his
>daughter, but she was not defeated. All she might be able to do was

look around, but a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single
>step.

>She had honestly expected that without Souichi providing her the energy
she needed, things would never come to fruition. That had proved not to
>be the case. All she had been able to do was slowly drain the strength
from the body, bolstering her own strength little by little. The way
>her body had been so weak ever since she had known Souichi, she did not
expect to achieve any results in months, possibly years.

>
Of course, she had not counted on Ranma. Who would have? Who could
>possibly believe that a boy as uncouth and uncivilised as he could

cause such improvement in the health of his friend Tomoe Hotaru? Every
>day, Hotaru's strength and endurance had grown rapidly. She was a

naturally weak and frail girl, but under the martial artist's direction,
>even that could be assuaged to a large degree. It was only by the

constant draining of that life energy that Hotaru was maintained at
>anywhere near her normal level.

>The little girl closed her eyes and relaxed against the pillow. Opening
her eyes and taking control of the body was a great triumph considering
>the circumstances. She did not know how much longer it would take, but
the date where she could take full control of the body while Hotaru
>slept was coming closer every day. From controlling an unconscious body
to dominating the girl's spirit was a large jump, but one that would
>follow with inevitable swiftness.

>With great effort, Mistress 9 made Hotaru's mouth curl into a smile.

Yes... The day was coming when she would take control of this
body
>permanently. When that day came, she would open the way so that her

Master could come into this world, destroying everything before
him.
>
Soon the world would tremble. Soon all would fall before the
power of
>Mistress 9 and Master Pharaoh 90. They would bring the Silence, and
all
would be destroyed. If she were only slightly more powerful,
she would
>have laughed in evil joy. The Silence would kill them all with equal

indifference. The Dark Moon Family, Ranma, even Kasumi. No one
would be
>spared

>Protected from everyone who tried to attack her, Mistress 9 wondered

whether she was safer here with Ranma, than she had been living
with
>Tomoe Souichi. Only time would tell, but she had no doubt of her

ability to bring about the end of the world from where she was.

>
Relaxing her control, Mistress 9 returned the body to its sleep.
There
>would be time enough to dominate and destroy later. For now she
would
bide her time and continue to grow her power.
>

>End of chapter.

>

>

End
file.